WWII

GERMANY'S FIRST DEFEAT: NAZIS UNDERESTIMATED HOSTILE TERRAIN AT MURMANSK

Bringing History to Life

WORLD WAR II'S FORGOTTEN BATTLES

TACTICS ★ TROOPS ★ WEAPONS

£9.99

Disastrous raid

Allies landing at Dieppe ended in catastrophe

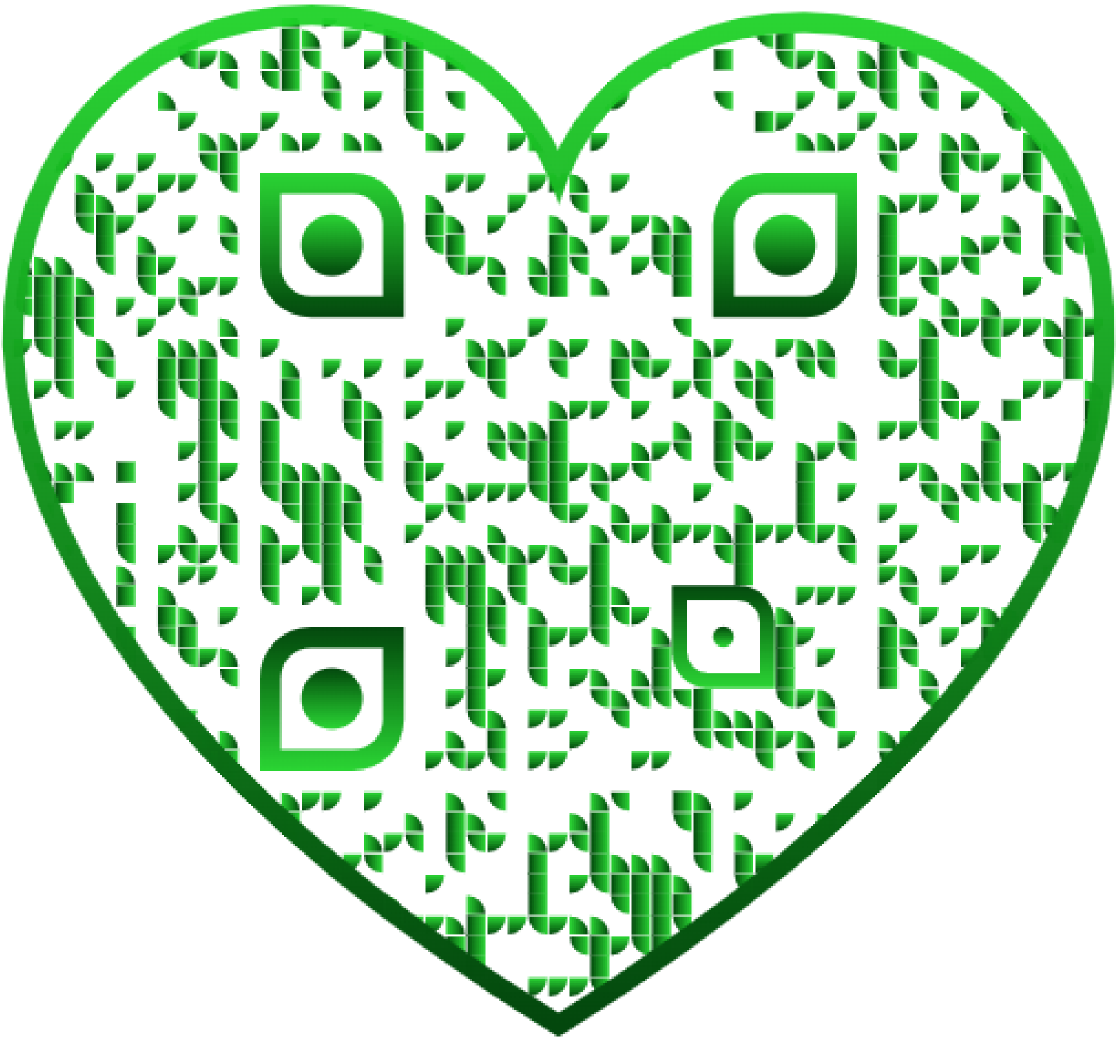
Surrounded by the Red Army

Germans slaughtered during break out at Korsun-Cherkassy

Island flooded

General Simonds submerged Dutch island of Walcheren

MADAGASCAR 1942: BRITISH FOUGHT VICHY FRENCH FOR CONTROL OF THE INDIAN OCEAN



WORLD WAR II'S
FORGOTTEN BATTLES

4 The Netherlands 1940
12 Eben-Emael 1940
18 Suomussalmi 1940
24 Dubno 1941
34 Operation Platinum Fox 1941
42 Crete 1941
50 Madagascar 1942
58 Dieppe 1942
64 Kasserine Pass 1943
72 Salerno 1943
84 Operation Dragoon 1944
92 Operation Infatuate 1944
100 Korsun-Cherkassy 1944
108 Castle Itter 1945
114 Jerusalem 1948

12

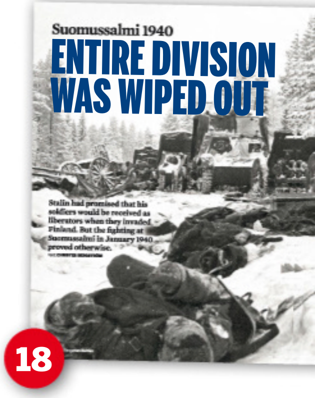
Eben-Emael 1940

BLITZKRIEG FROM ABOVE

In 1940, German paratroopers captured the 'impregnable' Fort Eben-Emael in Belgium. It was a daring operation, ordered by Hitler, which completely sabotaged the Allies' plans.

Text: CHRISTER BERGSTRÖM

WWII's Forgotten Battles 13



18

Suomussalmi 1940

ENTIRE DIVISION WAS WIPED OUT

Stalin had promised that his soldiers would be received as liberators when they invaded Finland. But the fighting at Suomussalmi in January 1940 proved otherwise.

42

Crete 1941

ENEMY CAME FROM THE SKY

In May 1941, the sky over the island of Crete filled with thousands of parachutes. Germany's well-trained troops had launched a bold unprecedented attack: the first invasion in history made solely from the air.

Parachute

Two German paratroopers gaze out towards the coast after landing in Crete in the summer of 1941.

WWII's Forgotten Battles 43

58

72

Salerno 1943

LANDING WITH IMPEDIMENTS

The Allied landing at Salerno started well. But an inexperienced commander – General Mark Clark – and fierce German resistance made Operation Avalanche uncertain. For several days, Clark even planned a retreat.

100

Korsun-Cherkassy 1944

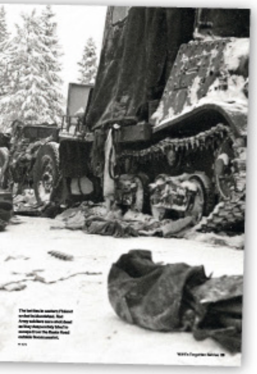
IN THE RED ARMY'S GRIP

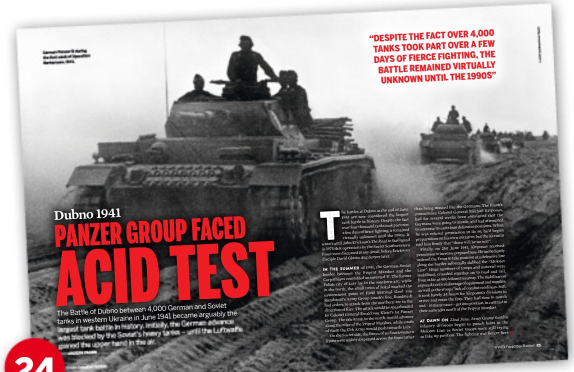
When the Red Army attacked the Korsun-Cherkassy Pocket on 26th January 1944, it succeeded in encircling nearly 60,000 German soldiers. On 2nd February, General von Manstein decided that his ill-equipped army would try to break out – a new Stalingrad had to be avoided at all costs.

The German defence consisted mainly of weary infantrymen.

"THE 1ST AND 2ND UKRAINIAN FRONTS WOULD ATTACK FROM THE WEST AND EAST RESPECTIVELY, AND ENCIRCLE THE GERMANS"

NATIONAL ARMY MUSEUM, LONDON





Dubno 1941

PANZER GROUP FACED ACID TEST

The Battle of Dubno between 4,000 German and Soviet tanks in western Ukraine in June 1941 became arguably the largest tank battle in history. Initially, the German advance was blocked by the Soviet's heavy tanks – until the Luftwaffe gained the upper hand in the air.

"DESPITE THE FACT OVER 4,000 TANKS TOOK PART OVER A FEW DAYS OF FIERCE FIGHTING, THE BATTLE REMAINED VIRTUALLY UNKNOWN UNTIL THE 1990S"

The battles at Dubno at the end of June 1941 are now considered the largest tank battle in history. Despite the fact over four thousand tanks took part over a few days of fierce fighting, it remained virtually unknown until the 1990s. It wasn't until John Erickson's *The Road to Stalingrad* in 1975 that operations by the Soviet Southwestern Front were discussed in any detail, before Erickson's disciple David Glantz dug deeper later.

IN THE SUMMER of 1941, the German-Soviet border between the Pripyat Marshes and the Carpathians resembled an inverted 'S'. The former Polish city of Lviv lay in the southern arc, while in the north, the small town of Sokal marked the easternmost point of Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt's Army Group South's line. Rundstedt had orders to attack from the northern arc in the direction of Kiev. The attack would be spearheaded by Colonel General Ewald von Kleist's 1st Panzer Group. The 6th Army, to the north, would advance along the edge of the Pripyat Marshes, while south of them the 17th Army would push towards Lviv.

On the Soviet side, the forces of its Southwestern Front were widely dispersed across the front rather than being massed like the Germans. The Front's commander, Colonel General Mikhail Kirponos, had for several weeks been convinced that the Germans were going to invade, and had attempted to organise its units into defensive positions. When he was refused permission to do so, he'd begun preparations on his own initiative, but the Kremlin told him firmly that "there will be no war".

Finally, on 21st June 1941, Kirponos received permission to increase preparedness. He immediately ordered the Front to take position at a defensive line along the border informally dubbed the "Molotov Line". Huge numbers of troops and materiel were mobilised, crowded together on to road and rail, from as far as 400 kilometres away. The mobilisation exposed a critical shortage of equipment and supplies, as well as the troops' lack of combat-readiness. Still, it took barely 24 hours for Kirponos's divisions to arrive and enter the fray. They had time to march and – in many cases – get into position, in contrast to their comrades north of the Pripyat Marshes.

AT DAWN ON 22nd June, Army Group South's infantry divisions began to punch holes in the Molotov Line as Soviet troops were still trying to take up position. The fighting was fiercer here

WWII's Forgotten Battles 25

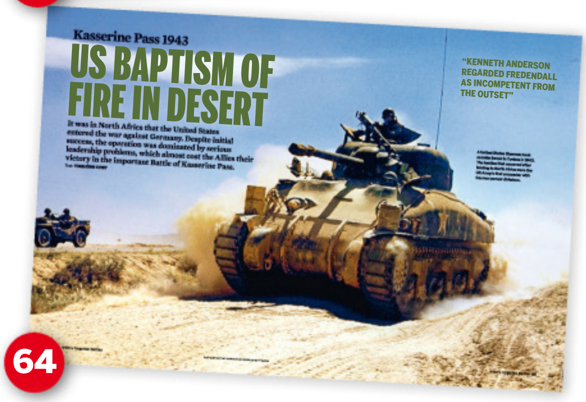
24

Dieppe 1942

A LANDING TO PLEASE STALIN

To keep Stalin on side, the Allies launched a raid on the German-occupied French part of Dieppe in August 1942. The appalling disaster that followed has never been fully investigated.

UNITED KINGDOM
London
Dieppe
Paris
FRANCE



Kasserine Pass 1943

US BAPTISM OF FIRE IN DESERT

It was in North Africa that the United States entered the war against Germany. Despite initial success, the operation was dominated by serious leadership problems, which almost cost the Allies their victory in the important Battle of Kasserine Pass.

"KENNETH ANDERSON REGARDED FREDENDALL AS INCOMPETENT FROM THE OUTSET"

64

Castle Itter 1945

UNHOLY ALLIANCE KEPT SS AT BAY

A determined lieutenant in the US Army, a disillusioned major from the Wehrmacht and a French tennis star all fought side-by-side during one of WWII's final skirmishes: the Battle for Castle Itter on 5th May 1945.

Jean Borotra.

"THE FORESTS SWARMED WITH BITTER SS SOLDIERS WHO WERE STILL DETERMINED TO KILL"

The castle was built to withstand a siege in the Middle Ages. In May 1945 it found itself under a similar attack.

WWII's Forgotten Battles 109

108

The battles that were overlooked

Which battles are considered 'unknown' depends, of course, on who you ask. The war is still one of the most studied subjects in history, and in principle every aspect has been examined extensively. Yet some topics have been given more space than others when that history has been written down. Struggles that left their mark on the general consciousness for various reasons – whether they were significant or not.

"Some battlefields may have played key roles"

In this issue, we've collected stories about those clashes during World War II that haven't received as much attention in the years since they were fought. Battles that are not as widely known, where not everyone can immediately place them geographically and list the warring parties as soon as they hear the name. But the fact is that even lesser-known battlefields contain dramatic stories that deserve attention. Some may even have played key roles in the war's outcome.

Read about places where the war both started earlier and ended later, where daring operations failed and achieved success, and where the combatants fought at least as hard as those on more famous battlefields.

Enjoy the issue!

Allied soldiers disembark at Vlissingen on the island of Walcheren in November 1944.

The Netherlands 1940

NAZI VICTORY DESPITE CHAOS

The German attack on the Netherlands during World War II was sometimes confused and clumsy, and at times almost a complete failure. But despite this, large parts of Rotterdam soon lay in ruins.

Text: **ANDERS FAGER**

German troops stuck in traffic jams during the attack on the Netherlands in 1940. On the left of the picture is a shot-down Junkers Ju 52.

World War II demonstrated that operational landings by air could be highly effective as long as they had a well-defined goal. The large air landings carried out in connection with each Allied invasion in Europe can be seen as textbook examples; always linked to the landing beaches and always making contact with other units after a day or two.

It is difficult to understand why the Allies, despite all this experience, decided to carry out the opportunistic Operation Market Garden in the Netherlands in 1944. One could also learn lessons from an example that took place in the neighbouring region during Germany's attack on the Netherlands in 1940. The battles over the National Life Insurance Company building in Rotterdam were Colonel Frost's defence of Arnhem in miniature. And General Student, who led the attacks in 1940, also led the defence of Arnhem in 1944.

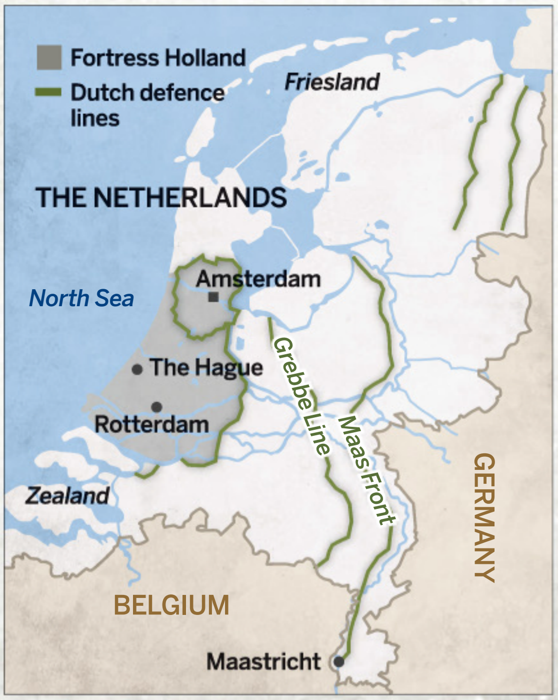
IN THE SPRING of 1940, Europe was preparing for war in the West and the Netherlands, which was trying to stay out of it, had declared itself neutral. It wanted peace with Germany, but that didn't stop the French and British trying to coax it into an alliance. The German leadership couldn't decide between ignoring the Dutch, invading the entire country or just fighting those in the south. In January 1940, it finally decided that the country would be captured as part of Fall Gelb (Case Yellow) – the attack on France – because the Germans wanted access to Dutch ports and airports.

Dutch commander-in-chief General Winkelman's plan was to face the Germans at lines of defence on the eastern border. But those lines, which should have made the Maas Front a continuous wall of canals and bunkers, were actually little more than dashes on the map.

THE IDEA WAS to protect Fortress Holland (an area in the western region of the Netherlands that included Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague) while waiting to be rescued by the French. There were unofficial plans to cooperate with the Belgians and the French, but no decisions had been made at government level. After the attacks on Norway and Denmark in April 1940, the Dutch had also strengthened the defences of several airfields in Fortress Holland as protection against German air landings. The Germans, for their part, encountered ►

RIJKSMUSEUM

“IN THE SPRING OF 1940, EUROPE WAS PREPARING FOR WAR IN THE WEST”



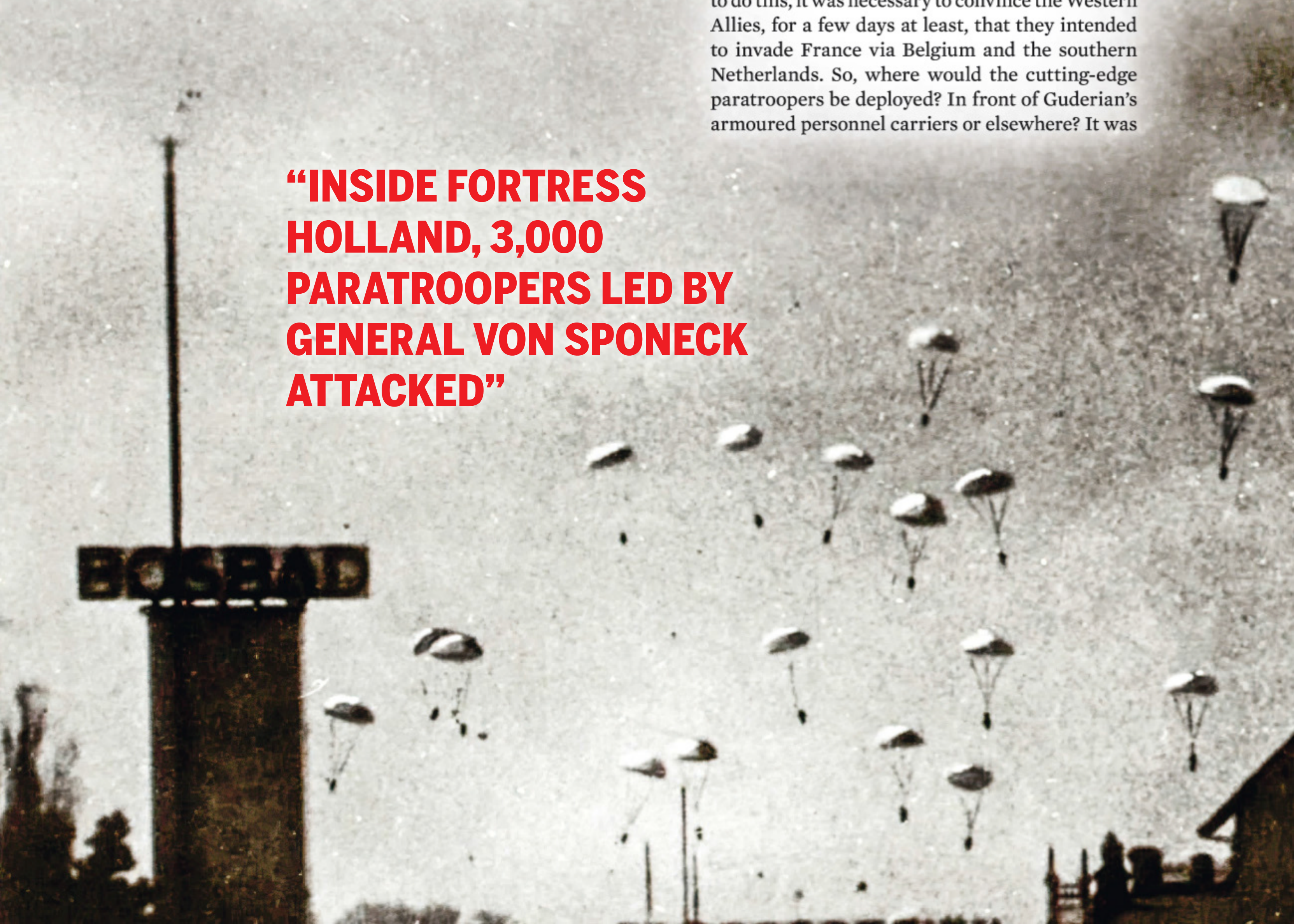
The Netherlands is a mass of rivers and canals, and has been likened to an archipelago of very closely packed islands.

various obstacles in their plans until they decided to use their airborne units for an attack on Fortress Holland. If the attack didn't immediately defeat the whole of the Netherlands, help would come once the 9th Panzer Division broke through the Dutch lines. General Student, commander of the Luftwaffe paratroopers, began to plan. He was to land at Rotterdam to take the Willemsbrug and Moerdijk bridges 20 kilometres to the south, and open a route into Fortress Holland for the panzer troops.

At the same time, at Hitler's request, three airfields outside The Hague were to be captured. These would then be used to enable the Germans to enter the city and capture the royal family and government. (Officers were taught appropriate phrases to say to the Dutch royal family.) There were 11,000 Dutch soldiers in Fortress Holland, but the Germans expected to be able to achieve their goals quickly and effectively before there was time to organise a meaningful defence.

THE GERMAN FALL Gelb plan was based on the bold idea of sneaking Guderian's panzer forces through the Ardennes, crossing the Maas, then heading north towards the Channel coast. In order to do this, it was necessary to convince the Western Allies, for a few days at least, that they intended to invade France via Belgium and the southern Netherlands. So, where would the cutting-edge paratroopers be deployed? In front of Guderian's armoured personnel carriers or elsewhere? It was

“INSIDE FORTRESS HOLLAND, 3,000 PARATROOPERS LED BY GENERAL VON SPONECK ATTACKED”



something of an afterthought, but the decision to use the airborne elite somewhere else at least helped give the impression that they'd started the anticipated attack with their very best men. It also gave Göring's paratroopers the chance to shine without interference from army generals. Guderian had to make do with just a few landings, where infantry was dropped using single-engine aircraft.

WHEN THE INVASION began on the night of 10th May, the Luftwaffe took out 50 percent of the Dutch Air Force in half-an-hour. At the same time, the largest airborne attack in history began, with almost 12,000 men being dropped at low altitude or landing in gliders.

Inside Fortress Holland, 3,000 paratroopers led by General von Sponeck attacked. They landed on the Valkenburg air base, north of The Hague, which hadn't been completed but was defended nonetheless. After fierce battles, during which the Germans were also shelled by Dutch warships, the air base was in their hands. Then it turned out that "not completed" meant that the airfield couldn't be used to land reinforcements. They had won a meaningless victory.

At Ypenburg airport, east of The Hague, anti-aircraft guns and armoured vehicles managed to turn the German landings into chaos. Nearly two dozen transport planes were shot down or destroyed on the ground. When the Germans finally gained control of the site, the wrecks of burning

German paratroopers were killed near The Hague in a failed attempt to capture the city on 10th May 1940.

NATIONAAL ARCHIEF

aircraft prevented them from landing reinforcements. Clearing runways tends to get overlooked when planning an invasion. In the afternoon, the Dutch attacked and recaptured the airport.

South of The Hague, the Germans managed to take the Ockenburg airfield without major problems, but when they tried to advance towards the city, they came up against minimal but determined resistance. In the afternoon there was still mayhem, but the assault on The Hague had failed. The Dutch had resisted with unexpected ferocity and the Germans had completely failed to bring in reinforcements. The battles degenerated into a couple of days of sporadic shoot-outs among the dunes and canals. The Dutch were mostly content to defend bridges and intersections, while von Sponeck didn't achieve much at all. 1,600 paratroopers were captured.

While the Germans' attack on The Hague was plagued with bad luck, squabbles and an almost naive overconfidence in their own ability, most of the landings south of Rotterdam went as planned, and they also had some good fortune. On the morning of 10th May, 90 men landed with He 59 seaplanes on the Maas in the middle of Rotterdam and took the Willemsbrug bridge. They were helped by a platoon that landed on the Feyenoord football team's home field. The Germans intimidated the police and drove away curious civilians, but met no resistance.

SHUTTERSTOCK

The German paratroopers' weapons were transported in canisters that were dropped at the same time as the soldiers.

AT THE SAME time, two German battalions landed at Waalhaven Airport in the southern suburbs of Rotterdam, while the fighter jets that had been based there was still battling bombers in the air above. The paratroopers didn't always have time to locate their weapons canisters, but went into combat with just pistols and grenades. (Weapons canisters were a German concept. One was dropped per group. Their purpose was to avoid an accident with your weapon during the jump. Instead, you had to run around unarmed until you found a canister!) In confused battles, a Dutch battalion was driven off and the Germans began landing reinforcements before the fighting even subsided.

Later in the afternoon, the Germans had the situation under control and could continue to fly in reinforcements. Troops were sent south to make contact with the two battalions that had landed at the Moerdijk bridges to Dordrecht. The situation there was confused, but the better-trained Germans had just about managed to take and keep the bridges in a battle against Dutch garrison and training units.

THE DUTCH DEFENCE of Rotterdam had been completely unprepared. No one had imagined

BETTMANN/GETTY

The defence of Rotterdam was eventually left to the bicycle-borne Light Division.

that there would be airdrops on the Maas. It fell to Colonel Scharroo to arrange the defence of Rotterdam's city centre at the northern end of the Willemsbrug bridge. There were 7,000 soldiers in the city, mostly sailors and air defence personnel, but also a thousand well-trained marines.

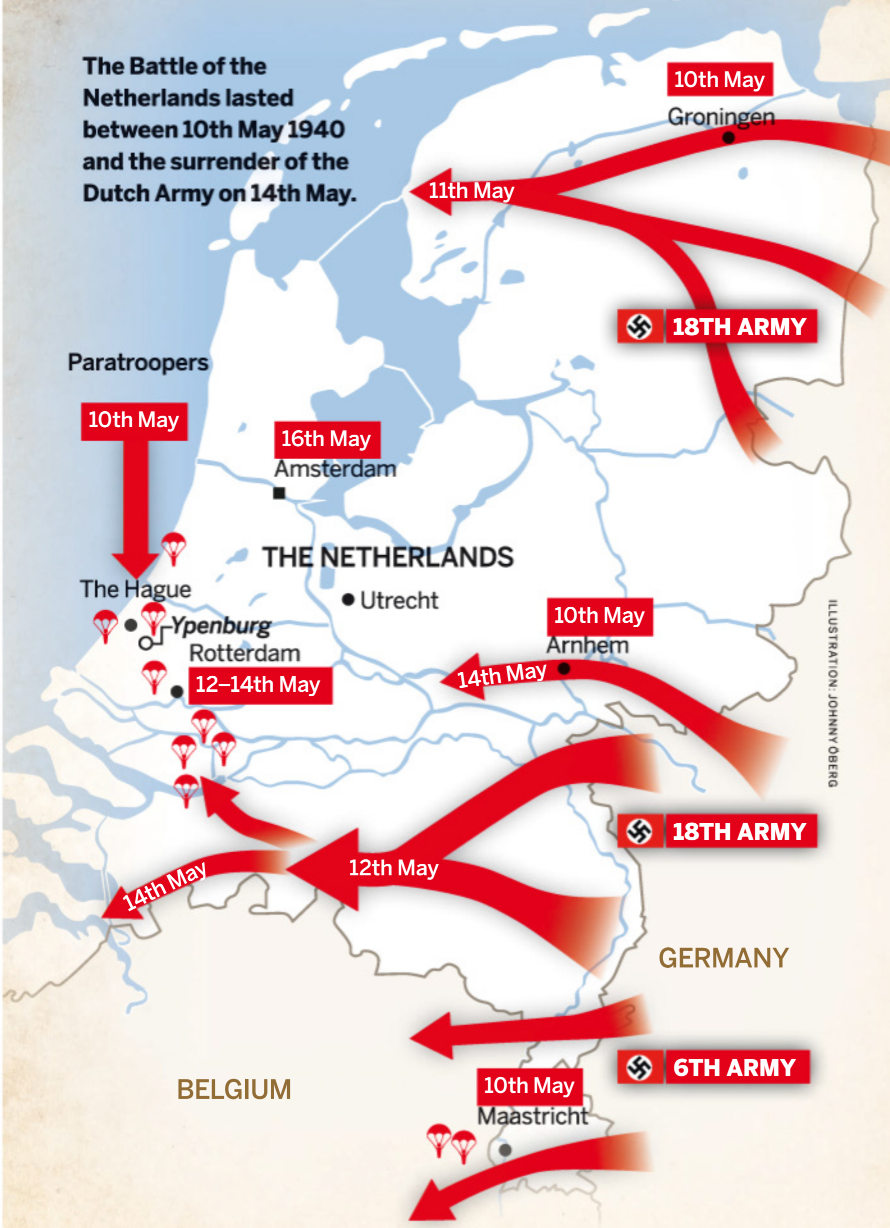
Scharroo gathered together naval and engineering soldiers to start driving the Germans back to the Willemsbrug bridge in the afternoon. The battles were strange at times, with thousands of civilians as spectators. A couple of Dutch gunboats tried to provide support but were attacked by German aircraft. Towards evening, a few dozen Nazis were entrenched in an office building belonging to the National Life Insurance Company at the northern road bridge. It lay within a small canal, like a moat, and with support from the south side of the Maas, the Germans were able to ward off all Dutch attacks.

While the fighting was going on in the heart of the Netherlands, the Germans had crossed the Dutch border at three points. In the north, the German 1st Cavalry Division began to push Dutch units up against the Afsluitdijk, something that would keep them busy for the next few days. In the south, Reichenau's 6th Army broke through the south-eastern Netherlands and into Belgium without even stopping to catch its breath. The attacks to break through the Maas Front and open up a route to Fortress Holland began with tentative German assaults on the Dutch, who were quick to retreat.

It was a clumsy war that made slow progress. The Dutch leadership tried to create order among all the chaos, but there were paratroopers everywhere and they seemed to have cut off the Netherlands' nerve centre. General Winkelman ordered his only major reserve, the bicycle-borne Light Division, to rescue Rotterdam.

THE NEXT DAY, the Germans tried to cross the Willemsbrug bridge in Rotterdam and protect the insurance building. But so many weapons were aimed at the 200-metre bridge that it was impossible. Scharroo began to get things in order and organised a defence against German attempts to secretly cross the river elsewhere. (There were boats of every conceivable kind in the harbour.) At the same time, the population of the battle zone spontaneously began to leave the city, something that would turn out to be particularly fortunate a few days later.

The paratroopers south of Rotterdam managed to take the bridges in the south and now had control all the way to the heart of the Netherlands. But help was still a long way off. The progress of the Maas Front was painfully slow and it needed to speed up, because the French Army was on its way through Belgium. It had to get to the southern ▶



The Battle of the Netherlands lasted between 10th May 1940 and the surrender of the Dutch Army on 14th May.

ILLUSTRATION: JOHNNY ÖBERG

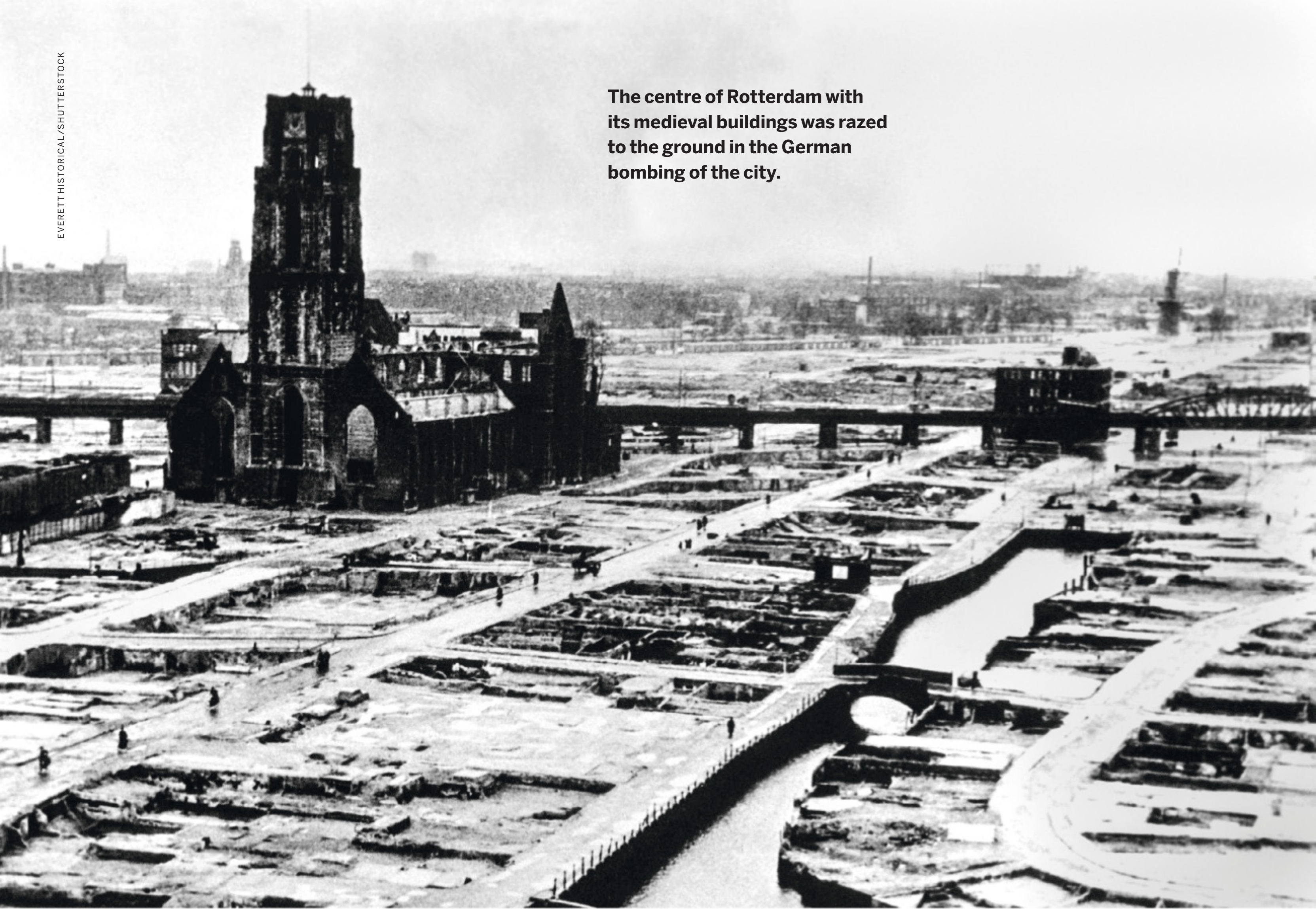
Big German advantage

★ Prior to the attack on France, the Netherlands was the only sector in which the Germans had a clear advantage. There were nine Dutch divisions against 22 German ones, and a quarter of a million Dutch troops against three quarters of a million Germans

The odds on the ground were evened out somewhat by the fact that the Germans were only deploying Küchler's 18th Army against the Netherlands itself. Reichenau's large 6th Army would just cut through the southern tip of the country in order to enter Belgium. Küchler's army consisted of seven newly mobilised and poorly trained infantry divisions. To gain some muscle, the army was reinforced with a number of regiments from the SS: 1st Cavalry, 7th Paratroopers, 22nd Air Landing and 9th Panzer Division. They were some of the best and a lot of the worst.

Despite this, the Germans' technical superiority was crushing. Their 800 modern aircraft were up against the 150 obsolete Dutch planes, and 750 combat vehicles battled the Dutch's three-dozen armoured vehicles and a few tanks.

The Dutch army had few radios and grenade launchers, but the artillery was reasonably equipped. However, the Dutch units were less well trained than the Germans.


EVERETT HISTORICAL/SHUTTERSTOCK

The centre of Rotterdam with its medieval buildings was razed to the ground in the German bombing of the city.

Netherlands to prevent the Germans from ever reaching Rotterdam.

On the 12th, the situation around The Hague and Rotterdam was unchanged. The Germans began to worry about how long they would be able to last. Food was plentiful, but ammunition was a problem and the Dutch had shelled Waalhaven Airport. Inside Fortress Holland, General von Sponeck had gathered a few hundred paratroopers east of The Hague and attempted a meaningful march towards Rotterdam. However, he met resistance north of the city and failed. Meanwhile, the Dutch Light Division took parts of Dordrecht, and the Germans hardly noticed. Could they take back the bridges?

TOWARDS AFTERNOON, THE Germans finally managed to break through the Maas Front. The 9th Panzer Division advanced towards Rotterdam without opposition. Around 17.00, the first tanks reached the Moerdijk bridge. An hour later, 300 km to the south, Guderian's forces rolled into Sedan on the Maas, something the Allied command paid little attention to at the time. However, that evening, they decided to halt all attempts to help the Netherlands.

"60 HEINKEL BOMBERS FLEW IN FROM THE NORTH-EAST AND ATTACKED ROTTERDAM'S CITY CENTRE"

General Winkelman realised the situation was bleak. The Netherlands was isolated, his units in the east were torn apart or in retreat, and all he could do was to try to defend Fortress Holland. In Rotterdam, Scharroo was ordered to push the Germans back from the Willemsbrug bridge at any cost, then destroy the crossing. At the same time, the Light Division was ordered to cut off the route to Rotterdam.

On the morning of the 13th, the Netherlands' last working bomber attacked the Moerdijk bridge and missed. In Rotterdam, 200 marines attacked the insurance building. Small battles were fought over canals, in apartments and under bridges. The Germans managed to defend the building, but by now half the defenders were wounded. They considered giving up, but then received the news (via the Dutch civilian phone network, by all accounts) that German tanks were on their way into southern Rotterdam.

MEANWHILE AT DORDRECHT, the Light Division was the Netherlands' last hope. But the division more or less stumbled into battle, and when they encountered German tanks, they first thought they were Dutch or French, then almost panicked. The attack came to nothing as more and more German units rolled north over the bridges. Nazi General Schmidt was unsure how to cross the Maas. Attacking over the Willemsbrug bridge and into the medieval city centre didn't sound very appealing, especially as Scharroo's well-prepared troops lay waiting. The 9th Panzer Division had already lost a lot of tanks trying to cross bridges that hadn't been anything like so well defended.

Schmidt began planning an attack on the Maas at several points at once, and requested support from precision bombing of the Dutch positions. But then he received a message from Göring: Schmidt was told to threaten the Dutch with air raid that would destroy the centre of Rotterdam. The German leadership felt that it was important to take the Netherlands out of the war as quickly as possible, and von Sponeck's paratroopers needed help.

IN THE EVENING, the Dutch royal family, government and treasury fled to England. General Winkelman had to handle the survival of the Netherlands as best he could. At the same time, on the other side of the Ardennes, the Guderian panzer troops had crossed the Maas. The next day, all French counter-attacks were repulsed and the war in the west was settled. But on the evening of the 13th, neither the German nor the French leadership understood the extent of what Guderian had accomplished, and the decision to make the Dutch surrender at any cost must be viewed from that perspective.

On the morning of the 14th, Schmidt sent a representative to Scharroo, threatening to bomb the city. Scharroo talked to Winkelman, and it was agreed that the Dutch would respond to the ultimatum no later than 16.40. What neither the Germans nor the Dutch in Rotterdam knew was that, thanks to a number of (possibly intentional) misunderstandings, the bombers were already on their way. Göring's weapon of terror was about to be unleashed.

When the roar of the bombers began to be heard in Rotterdam, there was surprise on both sides. A German commander with Scharroo reputedly said: "Colonel, I fully understand your bitterness."

Shortly after 13.00, 60 Heinkel bombers flew in from the north-east and attacked Rotterdam's city centre. The bombs triggered a firestorm, which due to damage to water pipes and a shortage of fire-fighters, quickly became unmanageable and destroyed 25,000 buildings. Due to the fact that the city had been virtually evacuated, only 800 civilians were killed. However, the Dutch defensive positions survived the bombing. As did the insurance building. But the whole north side of the Maas was shrouded in fire and smoke. Dutch units began to withdraw. Scharroo had to make a decision, well aware of what it meant if he capitulated. He went to talk to Schmidt and is said to have scolded the German general before telling him he was going to surrender. The Germans rolled over the Willemsbrug bridge and made their way through the mess that had been a medieval city.

The next day, Winkelman signed the Netherlands' surrender. There was resistance in Zealand for a few more days and 12 warships sailed to England. But the war's focus had already shifted to Guderian's panzer troops. Despite many mistakes, the Germans had got off lightly. About 2,000 had died and 6,000 men were wounded on each side. However, the Germans lost half of their transport fleet and the paratroopers hadn't been as successful as expected.

The attack on The Hague was the biggest German tactical failure of Fall Greb. But it was swept under the carpet after the spectacular attack on the Eben-Emael fortress in Belgium. They'd drawn on the wrong experiences and put daring and Teutonic will before meticulous training and planning. The error would have devastating consequences a year later, at the Battle of Crete, where sloppy reconnaissance and preparations led to a massacre.

Ander Fager is a writer and reserve officer.

German soldiers at a bridge shoot at enemy aircraft on 13th May 1940.

ULLSTEIN/GETTY

German paratroopers, in their distinctive brimless helmets, take a cigarette break after capturing the fortress.

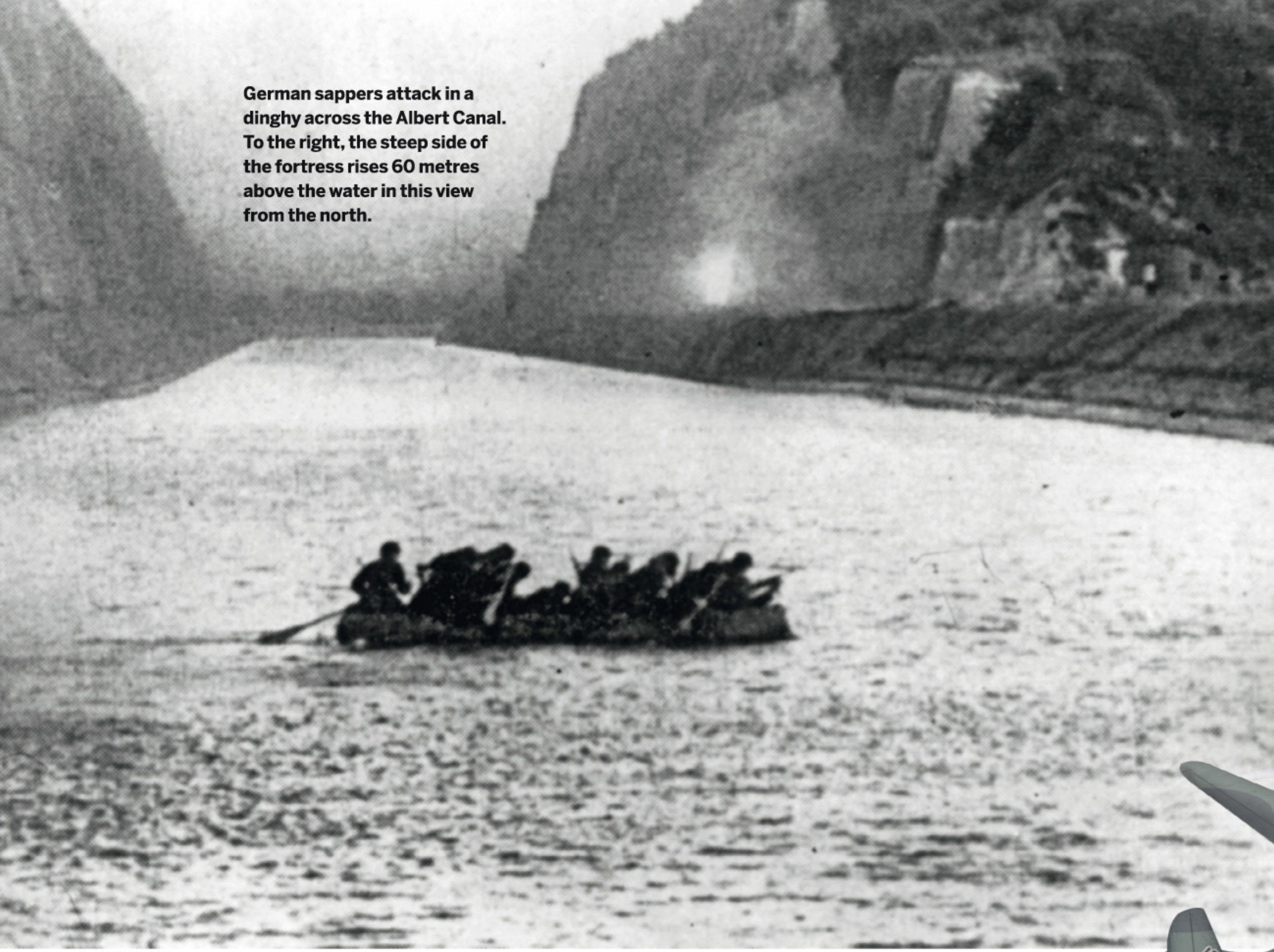
ULLSTEIN BILD/RITZAU SCANPIX

Eben-Emael 1940

BLITZKRIEG FROM ABOVE

In 1940, German paratroopers captured the 'impregnable' Fort Eben-Emael in Belgium. It was a daring operation, ordered by Hitler, which completely sabotaged the Allies' plans.

Text: **CHRISTER BERGSTRÖM**



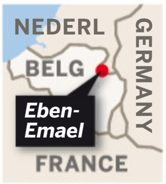
German sappers attack in a dinghy across the Albert Canal. To the right, the steep side of the fortress rises 60 metres above the water in this view from the north.

KEYSTONE/GETTY

The German glider pilot Heiner Lange lay in the grass, bleeding from eight wounds where shrapnel had hit both of his legs. About ten metres in front of him, the mighty Cupola 120 rose like a ridge of steel from the rock. The dome was equipped with two huge 120-millimetre guns with a range of more than 15 kilometres. There was no time to lose.

Despite his wounds, Lange got up and began to drag the two parts of the 50-kilogram hollow charge towards the steel dome. The race for France that culminated in June 1940's German invasion was underway. The hollow charge was a powerful device that, through a directed explosion, could pierce a hole in pretty much any armour. It was also a German secret – and almost as dangerous to the person who handled it as to the enemy. Forty-five seconds after it was fitted, the charge exploded with terrible effect. It was vital to stay well back.

With aching muscles and blood pouring from his wounds, Lange lifted the charge into position next to the guns at the top of the dome, where he attached it. Then he slid to the ground and began to limp away as fast as he could. Suddenly, he felt a heavy blow to his back and a stabbing pain in both ears. When he recovered, he saw splinters flying in a cloud of smoke, but heard nothing. The bang had burst his eardrums.



Eben-Emael protected the Belgian border at Liège.

The hollow charge could penetrate almost any armour.

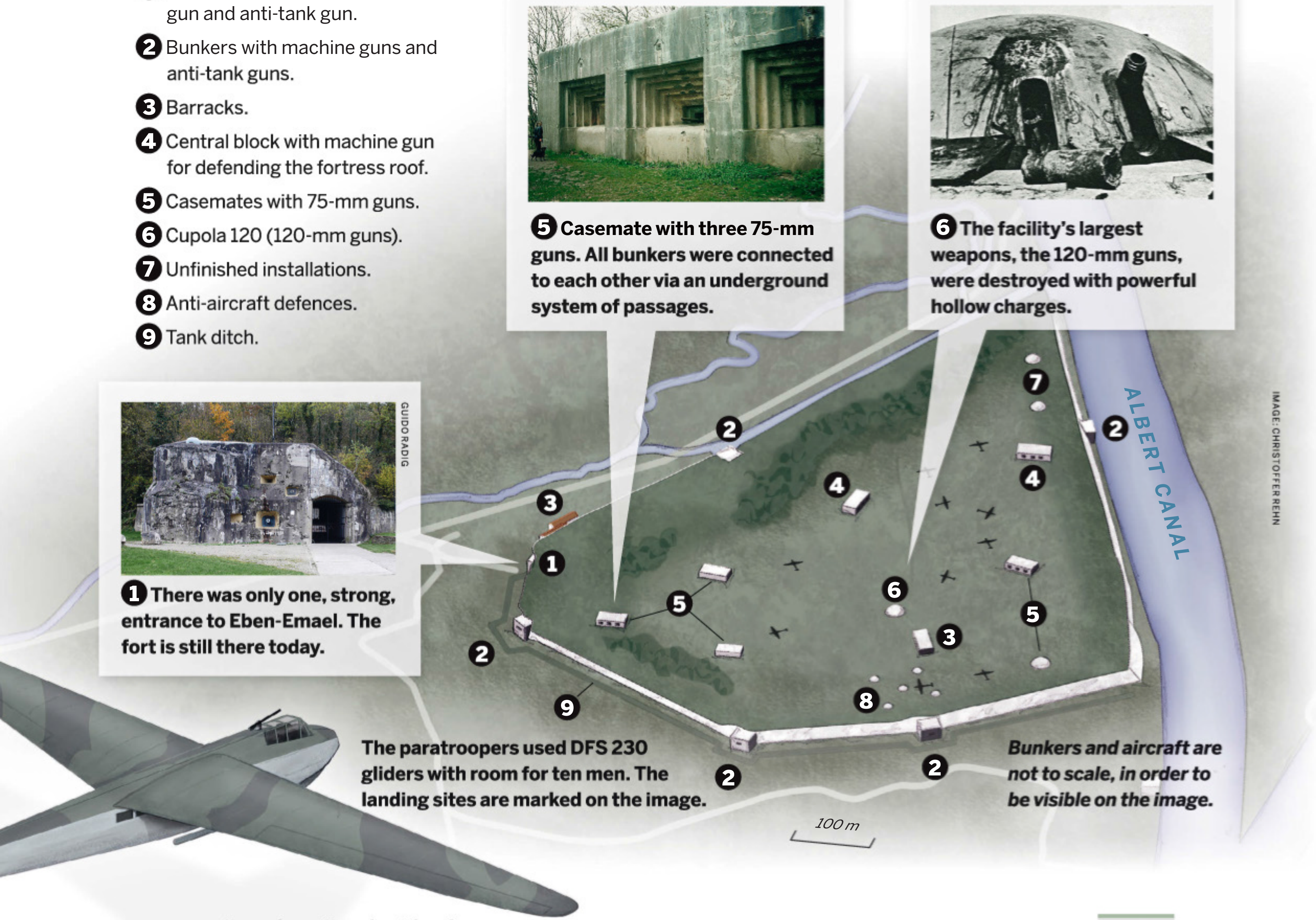
It was dawn on 10th May 1940. The major German offensive in the West had just begun, and Heiner Lange had eliminated the single biggest threat to the German advance – the main guns of the Belgian Eben-Emael fortress complex.

HITLER HAD DECIDED to launch his attack on France by going through neutral Belgium, bypassing the defences of the mighty French Maginot Line that ran along the Franco-German border.

But there was a serious problem: on the Albert Canal, 20 kilometres north-west of Liège, the Belgians had built the world's largest fortress, Fort Eben-Emael. Measuring 800 by 700 metres, with vertical walls 40–60 metres high built into

The fort's defences

1. Fortress entrance with machine gun and anti-tank gun.
2. Bunkers with machine guns and anti-tank guns.
3. Barracks.
4. Central block with machine gun for defending the fortress roof.
5. Casemates with 75-mm guns.
6. Cupola 120 (120-mm guns).
7. Unfinished installations.
8. Anti-aircraft defences.
9. Tank ditch.



5 Casemate with three 75-mm guns. All bunkers were connected to each other via an underground system of passages.

6 The facility's largest weapons, the 120-mm guns, were destroyed with powerful hollow charges.

1 There was only one, strong, entrance to Eben-Emael. The fort is still there today.

GUIDO RADIG

The paratroopers used DFS 230 gliders with room for ten men. The landing sites are marked on the image.

Bunkers and aircraft are not to scale, in order to be visible on the image.

IMAGE: CHRISTOFFER REHN

a mountain and equipped with a large number of guns, Eben-Emael was considered impregnable for good reason. The Belgians were determined that their bitter experience in World War I – when the country was invaded and occupied by the Germans – would not be repeated. So, they spent a large part of their defence budget on building this facility, which was intended to deter the Germans from marching into Belgium again.

But they hadn't reckoned on Hitler's ingenuity.

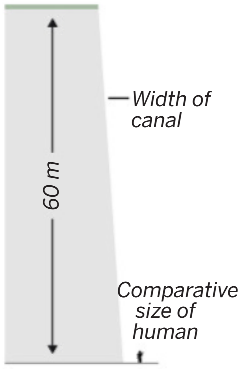
AFTER WORLD WAR II, it was common for the defeated German generals to blame their own shortcomings on Hitler. He could certainly be considered to be the personification of evil, but he was also a talented military tactician. It was Hitler, for example, who saved the military situation for the Germans on the Eastern Front at the end of 1941, and as late as autumn 1944, he drew up the plan for the Ardennes offensive.

The plan to take Eben-Emael – one of the most brilliant military operations of World War II – was Hitler's work. At the end of October 1939, almost two months after the outbreak of war, he formulated a strategy and invited the German paratrooper general Kurt Student to take on the assignment.

Student was the founder of the new German paratroop division. He'd learned about this new weapon from its pioneer, the Soviet Union's Red Army, a few years earlier. But Student had also brought back another idea from his visits to the East – the military use of gliders. Because the Germans weren't allowed to have any motorised aircraft in the years immediately following World War I, they'd advanced further than most in the development of engineless gliders.

When World War II broke out, Germany had the world's most advanced military glider, the DFS 230, which could carry a cargo of two tonnes, including nine fully equipped soldiers.

The DFS 230 had never been used in battle but, Hitler reasoned, a number of them should be able to land on Eben-Emael's flat roof. In order neutralise the armoured domes, which were made of steel ►



The walls of the fortress were about 60 metres high along the canal, and about 20 metres lower everywhere else.

German paratroopers attack with flamethrowers near Eben-Emael, Belgium, on 10th May 1940.

AKG/RITZAU SCANPIX

▸ up to 30 centimetres thick, 50-kilogram hollow charges would be used.

STUDENT WAS CAUTIOUS about Hitler's plan, which he considered "too adventurous", and asked the Führer to rethink. But Hitler didn't relent and asked Student to "sleep on it". When the general awoke the next morning, he realised that it was a brilliant strategy.

As a result of Hitler's attacks on Poland, France and Britain had declared war on Germany on 3rd September 1939, but for several months, both sides waited on the Franco-German border while each gathered its own assault forces. Hitler defeated his opponents by attacking on 10th May 1940. In the so-called Case Yellow operation plan, the attack on Eben-Emael played a central role. In fact, the assault on the Belgian fortress launched the entire Western offensive.

A platoon of 82 paratroopers aboard 11 gliders formed an advance guard for over three million soldiers, five thousand aircraft and two thousand tanks. The whole strategy relied upon the paratroopers being able to take the Belgians' defence by surprise, before they had time to get reinforcements. Therefore, the assault on Eben-Emael had to be carried out before the main attack, which was postponed until 05.25. The gliders would also be released from their tug aircraft 20 kilometres away from the target, so the garrison wouldn't hear any engine noise and be warned of the impending attack.

AT 04.30 ON 10th May 1940, 11 transport aircraft took off . They were towing the same number of DFS 230 gliders, aboard which the attack force, Storm Group Granite, were waiting. Two of the gliders failed to reach their target, but the other nine slid silently down on to the flat roof of the huge facility. The aircraft's landing distance was reduced by using brake parachutes.

The German paratroopers got to work quickly and methodically. They had been practising for six months. The hollow charges were primed and within ten minutes the paratroopers had neutralised their primary targets.

But now the Belgian counter-defences were at work. Adjacent artillery began firing on the Germans at the fortress. When the paratroopers established that the force's commander, Lieutenant Rudolf Witzig, was in one of the gliders that hadn't reached the target, a sergeant called Helmut Wenzel took command.

"We were so well trained that we did not need the officers," Wenzel commented afterwards.

THE GERMAN OPERATION ran like clockwork. Via one of the radios that he had brought with him, Wenzel contacted the bomber pilots who were circling in the air above, ready to help. They flew their Junkers Ju 87 towards the Belgian artillery and quickly got to work.

The single-engine Ju 87 Stuka was another German weapon of which the Allies had no equivalent. By diving towards its target, the aircraft was able to drop its bombs with unparalleled precision. Stukas came to play a key role during the German blitzkrieg offensive in the West.

When Witzig landed three hours later in another glider on the roof of the fortress, the mission was essentially already over. Now it was just a matter of enduring the Belgian counter-attacks, and for this the paratroopers received support from the ever-present Stukas.

The fighting was rather limited, because the fortress's 1,200-strong garrison was effectively kept shut inside by the Germans blowing up or otherwise blocking the exits to the roof. By the time German ground forces arrived on the morning of 11th May, six Germans and 24 Belgians had fallen. The air inside the besieged fortress was thick with gunpowder smoke and the garrison was completely demoralised when commander Major Jean Jottrand decided to surrender. A soldier was sent out bearing a white sheet attached to a broom. The battle was over.

"WITHIN TEN MINUTES THE PARATROOPERS HAD NEUTRALISED THEIR PRIMARY TARGETS"

WITH THE FALL of Eben-Emael, the entire Allied plan collapsed. The idea had been that the Germans – in the event that they tried to make their way through Belgium – would be delayed until British and French forces were able to regroup and attack their flank. Instead, it was the Germans' rapid armoured strikes that outflanked the Allies. Ten days later, 400 thousand Allied soldiers were surrounded at the northern French port city of Dunkirk.

Without the German capture of Fort Eben-Emael, the battle on the Western Front in May 1940 could have run a completely different course. What had begun as an assault by just a handful of German paratroopers at dawn on 10th May 1940, ended six weeks later with France's humiliating surrender to Germany.

The capture of the Eben-Emael fortress was the reason why both Britain and the United States decided to acquire their own paratroopers as well as military gliders. Few operations of such a small quantitative size have had such an extensive impact – both on the 1940 campaign and on posterity.

BUNDESARCHIV BILD 146-1979-128-26

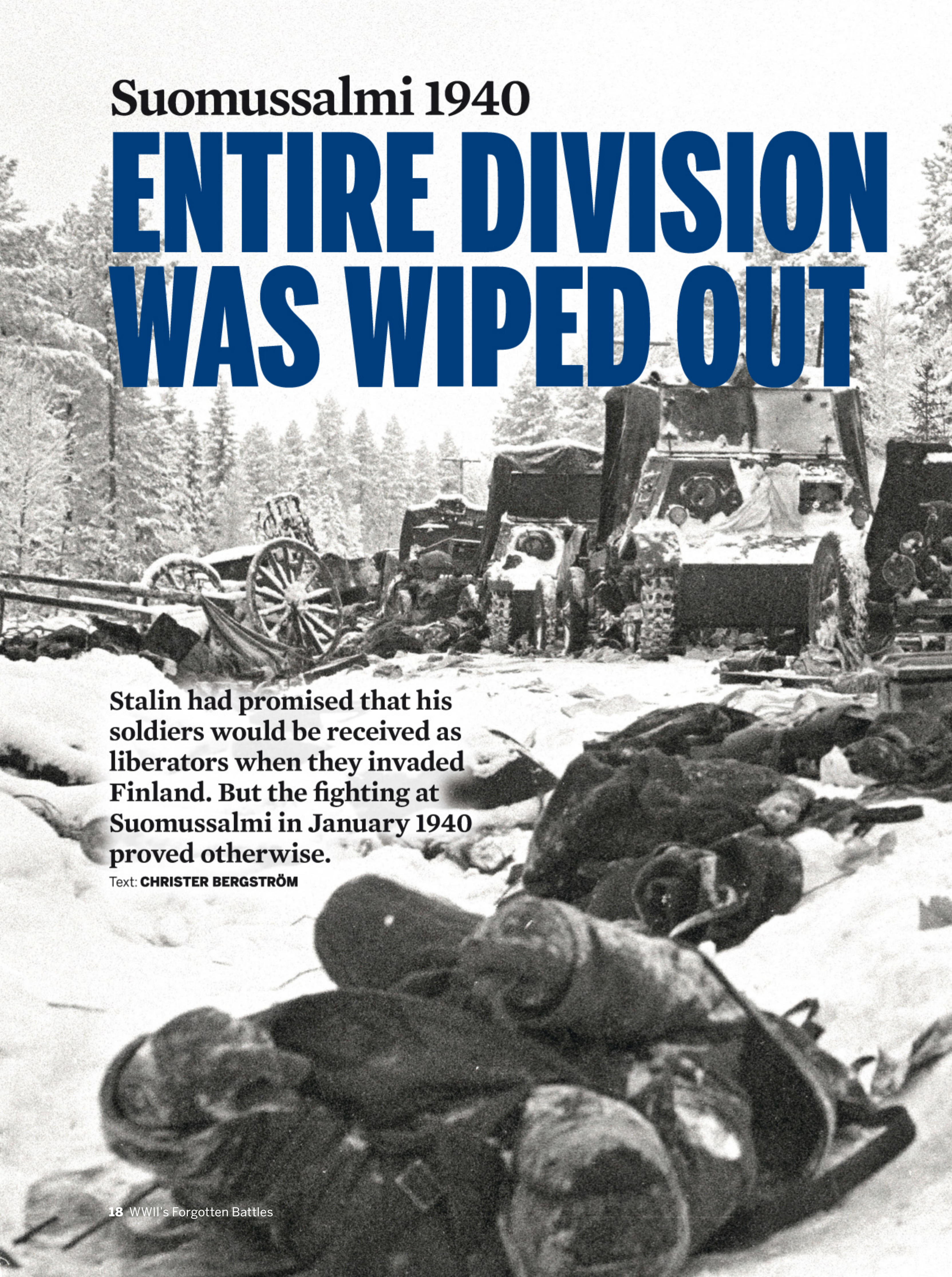
General Kurt Student doubted Hitler's plan at first, but changed his mind later.

Christer Bergström is a military history writer.

Further reading: The Fall of Eben Emael (1991) by James E Mrazek ★ **Fort Eben-Emael** (2005) by Tim Saunders

Suomussalmi 1940

ENTIRE DIVISION WAS WIPED OUT



Stalin had promised that his soldiers would be received as liberators when they invaded Finland. But the fighting at Suomussalmi in January 1940 proved otherwise.

Text: **CHRISTER BERGSTRÖM**

The battles in eastern Finland ended in bloodshed. Red Army soldiers were shot dead as they desperately tried to escape from the Raate Road outside Suomussalmi.

SA-KUVA

“Help us, we are dying here!” The heartbreaking radio message from Soviet regiment commander Major Ievliev was picked up several times before the radio went silent. During the night of 6th January 1940, Ievliev and his men were massacred on the forest road leading east from Suomussalmi, via Raate, to the Soviet border.

The scenes that took place there defy all description. Ukrainian soldiers, crowded together on the narrow road, tried to flee to the east while Finnish machine guns and artillery fired incessantly at them from inside the dark, snowy forest. The men on the road were so tightly packed that almost every Finnish bullet hit someone. That was the end of the Winter War for the Soviet 44th Division.

“THE MEN ON THE ROAD WERE SO TIGHTLY PACKED THAT ALMOST EVERY FINNISH BULLET HIT SOMEONE”

THE DECISION OF Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin to invade Finland on 30th November 1939 was influenced by his ruthless power policy. Stalin’s brutality, however, was not just limited to other countries, but was also directed equally – if not more – towards the inhabitants of the Soviet Union, and even the Red Army.

The purges in the Red Army had begun in 1937 and were still ongoing when the country was thrown into a war of aggression against Finland. With most of the Soviet officer corps removed and replaced by mindless yes-men, a giant with feet of clay was deployed against the small but brave country in the west. Nowhere was this more obvious than in the border forests at Suomussalmi, in the eastern part of central Finland. Here the Soviets positioned their 9th Army, with the 163rd Division at the lead. The task was to push through the wilderness to reach Oulu, on the Gulf of Bothnia, cutting Finland in half.

Suomus-
salmi
FINLAND
Helsinki

Suomussalmi is only a few miles from the Soviet border.

SA-KUVA

Colonel Hjalmar Siilasvuo (right) is given an account of the situation during the battle.

Soviet propaganda had claimed that the Red Army would be received as liberators in Finland. Therefore, when the Soviet soldiers crossed the border on 30th November 1939, they were in good spirits. In addition, the 163rd Division was possibly the best in the entire Leningrad Military District, and its soldiers were trained for fighting in woodland. But the operation’s organisation was astonishingly amateurish.

INSTEAD OF TAKING the road west straight to the small church village of Suomussalmi and beyond, the Soviets had grouped the 163rd Division 70 kilometres to the north-east. Therefore, it was forced to take a major detour around Lake Kiantajärvi, a 40-kilometre-wide natural barrier just inside the Finnish border. During the week it took the Soviets to take this diversion, the Finns managed to move in reinforcements.

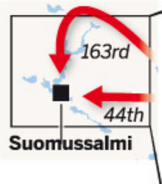
When the 163rd Division captured Suomussalmi on 7th December, a newly formed Finnish brigade under Colonel Hjalmar Siilasvuo was ready to advance. Siilasvuo’s first action was to group a strong defence on the road to Raate in the east, to prevent the Soviets from getting reinforcements that way. Then he launched an attack on Suomussalmi itself. This failed, but Siilasvuo had greater success than he imagined.

Unbeknown to the Finns, the Soviet 44th Division had finally set out towards Suomussalmi on the Raate Road from the east. But with increasingly thick snow on the ground, they were restricted to a single narrow road that ran through the thick snow-covered coniferous forest. This meant the Soviets were unable to take advantage of their great numerical superiority and were stopped by a small Finnish force.

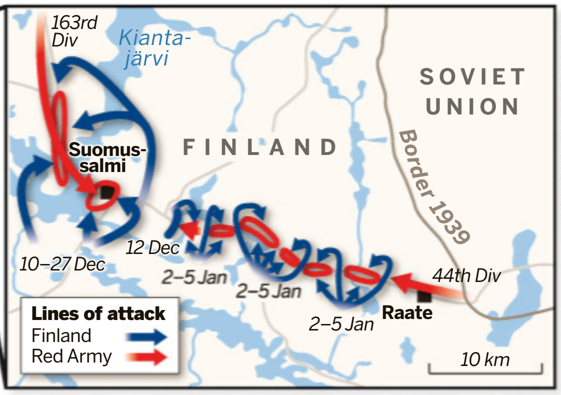
IF THE TWO Soviet divisions had coordinated their operations better, the Finns would have had a much harder time. For this failure, the commander of the Soviet 9th Army, General Mikhail Dukhanov, was replaced by General Vasily Chuikov. He would later become known for his leadership during the battles of Stalingrad. But in the winter of 1939-40, he failed to reverse the setback.

On the Finnish side, Siilasvuo was able to concentrate his main force against one Soviet division then the other. He started with the 163rd at Suomussalmi.

The weather worked in the Finns' favour. At the beginning of the offensive, mild weather prevailed, so Soviet tanks were unable to cross the ice on Lake Kiantajärvi and were forced to detour around it. Later in December, the temperature dropped sharply. Because the Finns had destroyed Suomussalmi, the Soviets found it difficult to find somewhere to keep warm. For two weeks, swift Finnish ski patrols made constant raids on Soviet field kitchens, which were destroyed one by one. As a result, the Soviet soldiers were not only forced to survive outside in temperatures of 20–30 degrees below zero, but were also often without hot food.



First stage. The Soviet 163rd Division attacks Suomussalmi from the north, 44th Division attacks from the east.



ERIK LINDHOLM/CHRISTOFFER REHN

Second stage. Finland responds with flank attacks. The 44th Division is split up and defeated.

THE SOVIET 44TH Division stood on a 30-km stretch of the Raate Road, unable to break through and exposed to the Finnish ski raids. Here the difference between Finnish and Soviet troops became clear. While Finnish units operated independently and often used their own initiative, the men of the Red Army fought with impressive tenacity, but often proved incapable of making their own decisions. The latter was due to the fear of retaliation, caused by the purges. The Soviets didn't have any ski troops of their own at that point either.

When Siilasvuo attacked on 27th December, he had 17,000 men at his disposal, which was more ►

SA-KUVA

Soldier with a Finnish variant of the Mosin-Nagant repeater rifle defends a position near Suomussalmi, January 1940.

SA-KUVA

Captured Soviet skis are piled up on the Raate Road.

HISTORIEARKIV

General Vinogradov was executed after his failure at Suomussalmi.

than the 163rd Division. By that time, the hardships had eroded the Soviet elite division's combat value, so Soviet headquarters decided to withdraw it. If that had happened earlier, the catastrophe might have been avoided.

THE RED ARMY retreated in a northerly direction over the ice of Lake Kiantajärvi, and was forced to run through gaps between attacking Finnish ski patrols – when the men weren't exposed to Finnish artillery fire. At one point, a pair of Finnish trucks armed with several heavy machine guns sneaked right up to a Soviet column of 500 soldiers. The frozen Soviets didn't react, as they assumed they were their own trucks on their way from Suomussalmi. The Finns opened a devastating hail of fire at short range and executed a horrifying massacre out on the open ice. Twenty minutes later, 400 dead Soviets were all that was left on the bloody snow – only one hundred had managed to escape. The Finnish trucks returned to their own lines with no losses other than one badly wounded soldier.

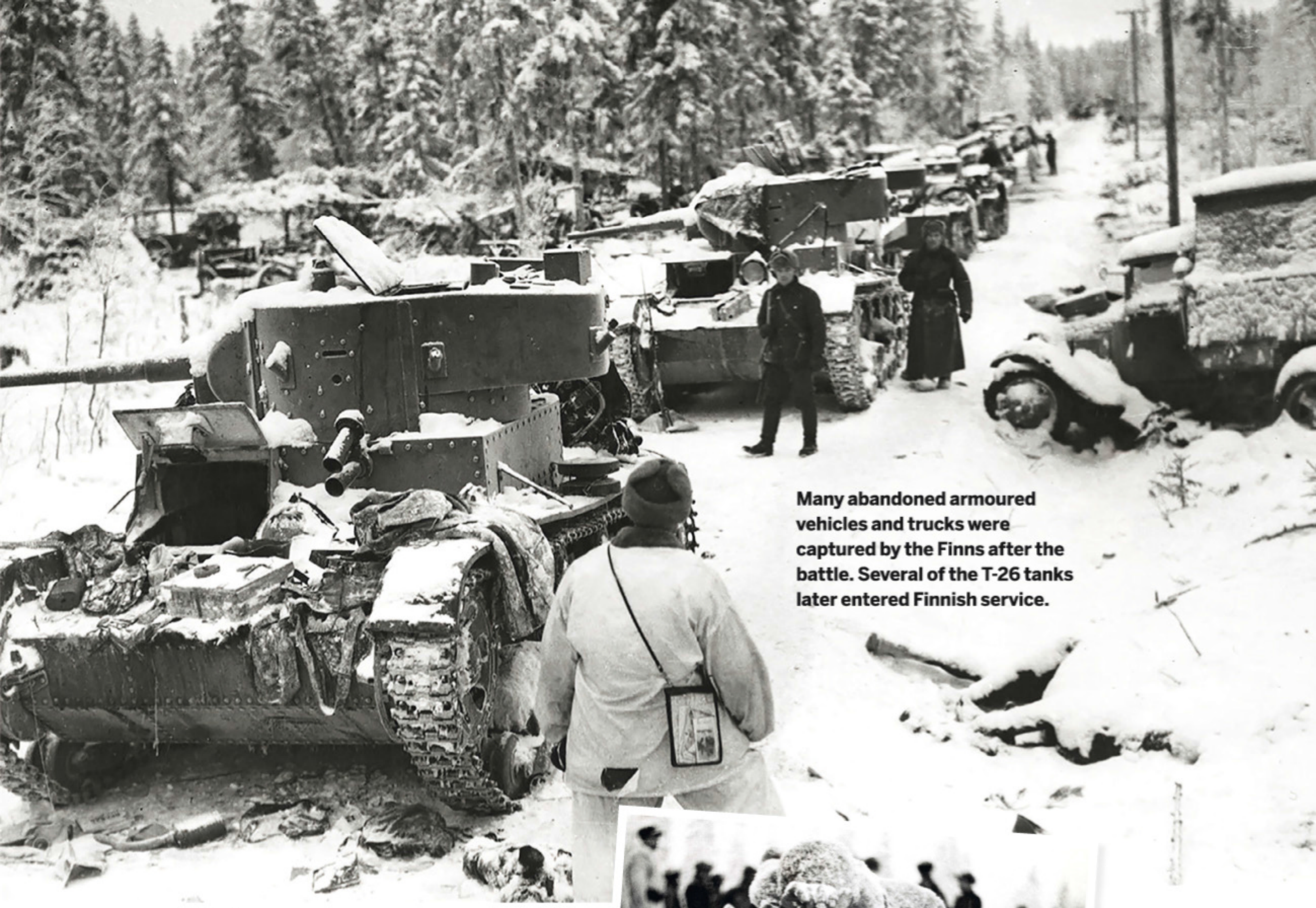
Although most of the 163rd Division escaped, the unit was exhausted and couldn't be used again during the Winter War. The losses amounted to at least 5,000 fallen and 300 captured. In the evacuated area, Finns found 26 abandoned tanks, 39 guns and 181 trucks.

Next in line was General Alexei Vinogradov's 44th Division, which consisted of Ukrainians who'd recently arrived on the Finnish front. During the whole Battle of Suomussalmi, they'd stayed on the Raate Road, about a mile further east. The most logical thing, after the withdrawal of the 163rd Division, would have been to withdraw the 44th Division as well and try to attack in another sector – inexplicably, however, this didn't happen.

From the start, Siilasvuo had 12 battalions against Vinogradov's seven. Because the Finns had the advantage, they could constantly attack with numerical superiority.

Their tactics were based on a series of flank attacks from the surrounding forests to split the 44th Division into several small groups. These came to be called *motti,* after the Finnish word for a pile of firewood.

THE FIRST ATTACK was launched on New Year's Day and was directed at the westernmost part of the 44th Division, where it was strongest. The aim was to prevent Vinogradov from regrouping his forces further back, where flank attacks would be carried



Many abandoned armoured vehicles and trucks were captured by the Finns after the battle. Several of the T-26 tanks later entered Finnish service.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

“THEIR TACTICS WERE BASED ON A SERIES OF FLANK ATTACKS FROM THE FORESTS”

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

The bodies of dead Soviet soldiers froze solid in the icy winter temperatures.

out to create *mottis*. The thousand ski troops under Captain Eino Lassila who carried out this attack met with fierce resistance and suffered heavy losses. But the battalion commander Mäkiniemi threatened to dismiss Lassila if the squad didn’t hold its positions.

Meanwhile, several flank attacks were carried out that split up the 44th Division. Because Finnish artillery aimed at the large fires that the Ukrainians were preparing to warm themselves, Vinogradov’s men were at the mercy of the minus 30-degree cold.

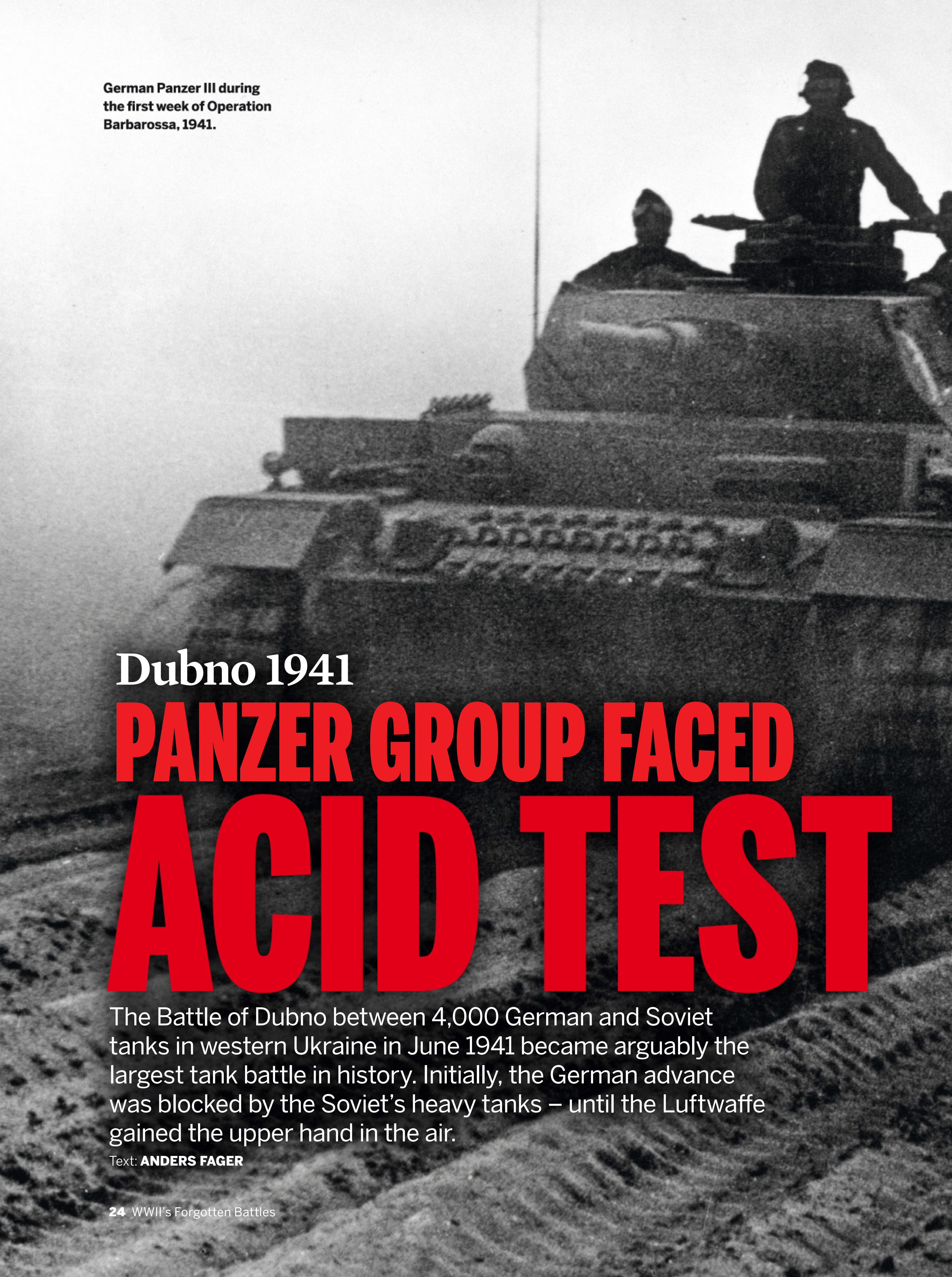
Only on the night of 6th January did the Soviet High Command decide to withdraw the 44th Division. By that point, the Finns had grouped large units all around the Soviet *mottis*. The attempted breakout ended in carnage. Panicked, the Ukrainian soldiers abandoned their equipment and fled into the forest. Most managed to get back to their own lines, but there was plenty of war booty left on the Raate Road: 43 tanks, 10 armoured cars, 100 guns, 260 trucks and large quantities of other equipment.

The Finnish authorities made sure that journalists from all over the world visited the battlefield, and even today, images of the loot at Suomussalmi and Raate epitomise the Finnish Winter War. Stalin was furious and demanded that heads should roll. General Vinogradov was shot in front of his entire division. Several other officers were executed in a similar manner. General Chuikov escaped, but in the memoirs that he wrote after the war, he didn’t mention the massacre at Suomussalmi and Raate once. ✪

Christer Bergström is a military history author and has written 30 books about World War II.

Further reading:

- **Finland at War: The Winter War 1939–40** (2015) by Vesa Nenye, Peter Munter and Toni Wirtanen
- ★ **War of the White Death – Finland Against the Soviet Union** (2011) by Bair Irincheev.



German Panzer III during the first week of Operation Barbarossa, 1941.

Dubno 1941

PANZER GROUP FACED ACID TEST

The Battle of Dubno between 4,000 German and Soviet tanks in western Ukraine in June 1941 became arguably the largest tank battle in history. Initially, the German advance was blocked by the Soviet's heavy tanks – until the Luftwaffe gained the upper hand in the air.

Text: **ANDERS FAGER**

SCHERL/SZ PHOTO/RITZAU SCANPIX

"DESPITE THE FACT OVER 4,000 TANKS TOOK PART OVER A FEW DAYS OF FIERCE FIGHTING, THE BATTLE REMAINED VIRTUALLY UNKNOWN UNTIL THE 1990S"

The battles at Dubno at the end of June 1941 are now considered the largest tank battle in history. Despite the fact over four thousand tanks took part over a few days of fierce fighting, it remained virtually unknown until the 1990s. It wasn't until John Erickson's *The Road to Stalingrad* in 1975 that operations by the Soviet Southwestern Front were discussed in any detail, before Erickson's disciple David Glantz dug deeper later.

IN THE SUMMER of 1941, the German-Soviet border between the Pripyat Marshes and the Carpathians resembled an inverted 'S'. The former Polish city of Lviv lay in the southern arc, while in the north, the small town of Sokal marked the easternmost point of Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt's Army Group South's line. Rundstedt had orders to attack from the northern arc in the direction of Kiev. The attack would be spearheaded by Colonel General Ewald von Kleist's 1st Panzer Group. The 6th Army, to the north, would advance along the edge of the Pripyat Marshes, while south of them the 17th Army would push towards Lviv.

On the Soviet side, the forces of its Southwestern Front were widely dispersed across the front rather than being massed like the Germans. The Front's commander, Colonel General Mikhail Kirponos, had for several weeks been convinced that the Germans were going to invade, and had attempted to organise its units into defensive positions. When he was refused permission to do so, he'd begun preparations on his own initiative, but the Kremlin told him firmly that "there will be no war".

Finally, on 21st June 1941, Kirponos received permission to increase preparedness. He immediately ordered the Front to take position at a defensive line along the border informally dubbed the "Molotov Line". Huge numbers of troops and materiel were mobilised, crowded together on to road and rail, from as far as 400 kilometres away. The mobilisation exposed a critical shortage of equipment and supplies, as well as the troops' lack of combat-readiness. Still, it took barely 24 hours for Kirponos's divisions to arrive and enter the fray. They had time to march and – in many cases – get into position, in contrast to their comrades north of the Pripyat Marshes.

AT DAWN ON 22nd June, Army Group South's infantry divisions began to punch holes in the Molotov Line as Soviet troops were still trying to take up position. The fighting was fiercer here ►

than anywhere else along the front on the first morning. At the same time, the Luftwaffe attacked the Soviet Air Forces, but even here Kirponos's raising of alert levels made a difference. Over the following days, his flight squadrons offered some last-ditch resistance, instead of being wiped out on the ground.

KLEIST WANTED TO break through in two places: at Sokal, and 40 kilometres north, at Volodymyr-Volynskyi. By midday, German infantry had seized Sokal and the 11th Panzer Division was advancing in depth.

Kirponos had two armies at the front. To the north, in front of Kleist's tanks, lay the Soviet 5th Army while the Soviet 6th Army was mustered along the border at Lviv. The Germans broke through the border between the two armies, making it unclear which one should tackle the invader.

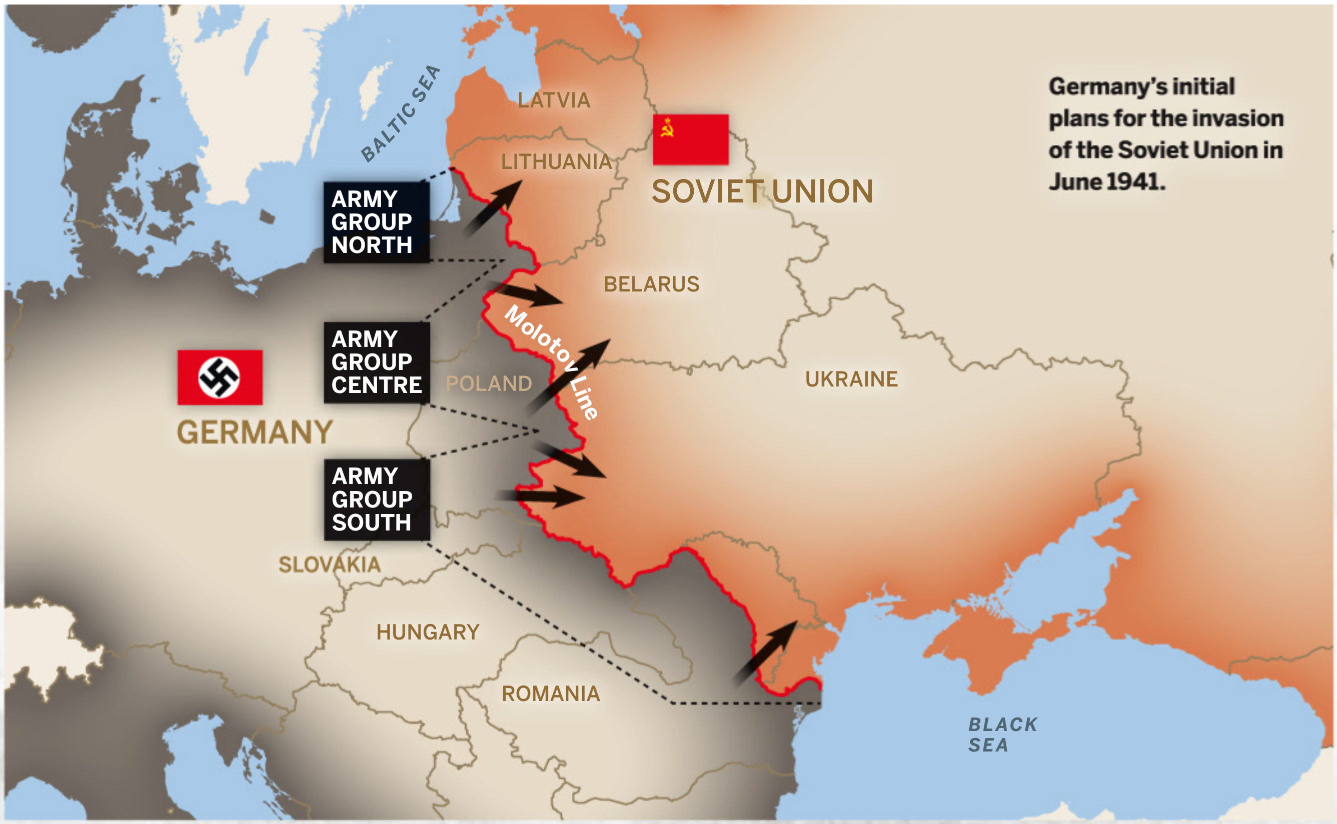
At the same time, Soviet communications between regiments and divisions constantly broke down. There were insufficient radios and even fewer signallers. Only senior staff had access to telephones, allowing them to rebuke each other but do little else. For example, at Volodymyr-Volynskyi, the Germans had encountered fierce opposition from the 87th Rifle Division, but Kirponos had no contact with his division, so had no idea what was going on. In contrast, Kleist held back his armoured units while his infantry took on the hesitant defenders.

HISTORIE ARCHIVE

Colonel General Ewald von Kleist led the 1st Panzer Group in 1941.

KIRPONOS HAD ACCESS to around 3,400 tanks – divided into six mechanised corps. At Lutsk – almost directly in the path of Kleist's intended direction of attack – stood the 22nd Mechanised Corps with 710 tanks (including 30 heavy T-34 and KV-1 tanks). At Lviv, 70 km south of the breakthrough point, the 4th Mechanised Corps lay in wait with another 700 tanks (of which 100 were T-34s and KV-1s). Further south again, in Uman, the huge 8th Mechanised Corps stood ready with 900 tanks (170 T-34s and KV-1s). For good measure, to the east of these was the 15th Mechanised Corps (750 tanks, 130 of which were T-34s and KV-1s), while just over 120 km further east were two smaller mechanised corps: the 9th and the 19th (750 tanks, but just five T-34s and KV-1s between them).

In total, this meant that – in addition to the 710 tanks blocking Kleist's entire complement of 720 tanks – the Germans were threatened by


BALTIC SEA
LATVIA
LITHUANIA
SOVIET UNION
ARMY GROUP NORTH
BELARUS
Molotov Line
ARMY GROUP CENTRE
POLAND
UKRAINE
GERMANY
ARMY GROUP SOUTH
SLOVAKIA
HUNGARY
ROMANIA
BLACK SEA

Germany's initial plans for the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941.

Soviet T-26 tanks roll to the front to meet the German invaders on 21st June 1941.

HULTON DEUTSCH/CORBIS/GETTY

1,900 further tanks on their southern flank, and another 750 tanks to the north. Of these, 450 tanks were new T-34s and KV-1s, whose thick armour the German 37-mm guns had difficulty penetrating.

Rounding the numbers off, only two-thirds of Kleist's tanks were Panzer IIIs and IVs with larger-calibre guns. Only the Panzer III was armed with 50-mm guns that gave it a genuine chance against the T-34. The rest of his convoy were obsolete light tanks. In addition, Kleist held one of his divisions in reserve, so 140 of his tanks weren't deployed until the beginning of July. Kirponos, on the other hand, had almost 1,000 additional tanks dispersed among smaller reserve units.

KIRPONOS REALISED THAT his front had been breached at Sokal and correctly surmised that this was the German main attack. At 17.00 he gave the 4th and 15th Mechanised Corps orders to attack the spearhead. The 8th Mechanised Corps further to the south received the same order. The units had already received similar orders from the 6th Army commander, which would create many misunderstandings over the coming days.

That evening, when Stalin had recovered from the shock of being invaded, he ordered a counter-offensive without any consideration for the reality on the ground. 'Directive No 3' ordered the Southwestern Front to surround and defeat the German armies in front of it, and then advance on Lublin. All within the space of two days. Kirponos replied to Stalin that he needed more time. It would take weeks for Stalin to appreciate the extent of Soviet losses during the first days of the war, and over a year before he stopped ordering attacks without forethought.

"THE SOVIET TANKS THREW THEMSELVES INTO ATTACKS WITH NO SUPPORT"

AT MIDNIGHT, STALIN'S envoy General Georgy Zhukov arrived at Kirponos's headquarters and, after a heated discussion, accepted that Stalin's plan was unworkable. Instead, Zhukov approved Kirponos's plan, and went out into the night to track down the 8th Mechanised Corps.

Zhukov's hustle was an effective tactic in the sluggish Soviet system. He'd applied it when defeating the Japanese at Khalkhin Gol in 1939. It meant he had to be everywhere, inspecting troops while issuing orders and threats. For the next few

German infantry use a Panzer III as cover against the Red Army in 1941. The picture was published under the title 'The Army in the Greater German Freedom Struggle' by the German Army's combat photography unit.

PHOTOQUEST/GETTY

days, Zhukov was constantly on the move to make sure Korpono's plan was implemented.

The following day, Kleist's attack continued without achieving a clear breakthrough. At dawn, the 11th Panzer Division clashed with sections of the 4th Mechanised Corps in what would become a skirmish typical of the battle. The Soviet tanks threw themselves into attacks with no support. For a brief moment, panic broke out among German crews when they realised the T-34 and KV-1 tanks appeared indestructible. But the Germans recovered quickly, and as the Red Army's tanks were targeted by aircraft, artillery and even infantry, the Panzers went after the enemy's softer parts. The Soviet attacks disintegrated into little more than individual tanks firing at everything that got in their way – until they were disabled, lost heart, or ran out of shells.

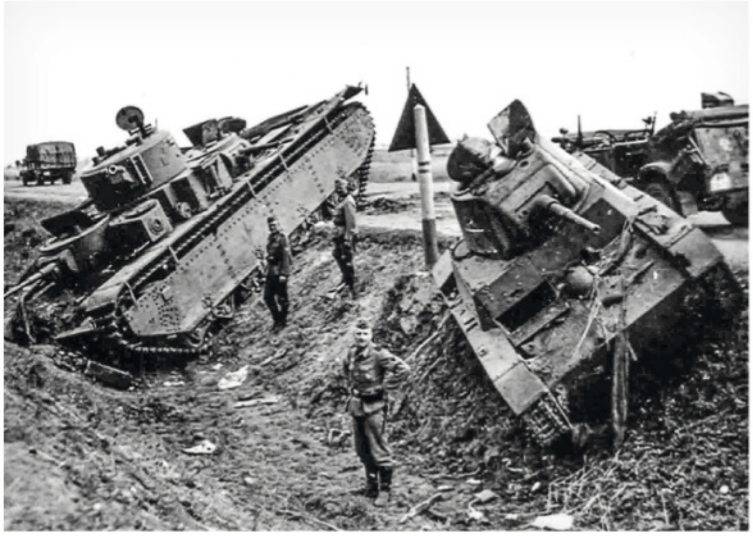
ONE PROBLEM (AMONG many) for the Soviets was that their units marched in individual segments to the front. In the mechanised corps, the tanks came first, followed by selected artillery pieces pulled by truck, and then the infantry on foot. At the back were the rest of the artillery pulled by tractors. Entire units got lost or stuck on the road. Halfway to Kiev, the 9th Mechanised Corps had to commandeer 200 trucks from a district reserve simply to transport its infantry. Kirponos's army of 3,400 tanks had started to dissipate – 150 of the 9th Mechanised Corps' 900 tanks had already gone missing.

By the evening of 23rd June, the southern German spearhead had already penetrated more than 60 km into Soviet territory. The Germans now also broke through at Volodymyr-Volynskyi, and Kleist allowed two new panzer divisions to move east.

On the 24th, the German attack continued along two lines, while the Soviet 6th Army south of the breakthrough point found itself trying to cover an ever-lengthening front behind its own flank. The 5th Army failed to manage even that. A 40-kilometre hole now gaped between the two Soviet armies. The 22nd Mechanised Corps, which found itself in the middle of the hole, having spent two days waiting for its artillery to appear, was now ordered to stop Kleist's northern breakthrough. The attack was a complete failure. The corps commander had suddenly lost half his strength – over 300 tanks had vanished. Eventually, he sent 50 tanks to meet the 300 tanks of the 13th and 14th Panzer Divisions. By evening, the commander had fallen in battle, and as the German tanks moved on to Lutsk, they passed rows of abandoned Soviet tanks.

ON 25TH JUNE, the 11th Panzer Division rolled into Dubno, 105 kilometres from the border and hours ahead of the division Kirponos had deployed to hold the city. Behind it, the 16th Panzer Division followed to protect the spearhead's flank. At the same time, Kleist's northern force closed in on Lutsk, passing through hordes of fugitives fleeing the Soviet counter-attacks. By evening, they'd gained a foothold in the city. The same afternoon, Dmitry Ryabyshev, commander of the 8th Mechanised Corps, stated he'd arrived at his starting position for attacking the Germans' southern flank.

By the time he arrived, however, the corps had lost half its strength through mechanical failure and air raids, and received three different orders on where to attack from. At the same time, it became clear that the 4th Mechanised Corps, which had been ordered to attack alongside the 8th and 15th ►



HISTORIE ARCHIVE

Abandoned T-26 and T-35 tanks at Dubno in June 1941.

The unknown general

★ Mikhail Kirponos (1892-1941) was the son of poor Ukrainian peasants. His career took the long route, from first being drafted into the Tsar's army in WWI to enlisting in the Red Army and finally being promoted to officer in 1927. He survived Stalin's purges and commanded a division during the Winter War. In June 1941, Kirponos was colonel general and commander of the Southwestern Front when Germany invaded.

Kirponos was killed during the siege of Kiev on 20th September 1941. He was unknown in the West until John Erickson's *The Road to Stalingrad* praised his "stubbornness, persistence and foresight" and said he was the soviet commander who performed best during the initial weeks of the invasion.

HISTORIE ARCHIVE

Mikhail Kirponos

A battle-worn Panzer III Ausf G from the 11th Panzer Division. Note the spare caterpillar segments and the damage to the turret to the right of the 50-mm gun.

HISTORIE ARCHIVE

Mechanised Corps, was deploying further south, where the German 17th Army was pushing on Lviv.

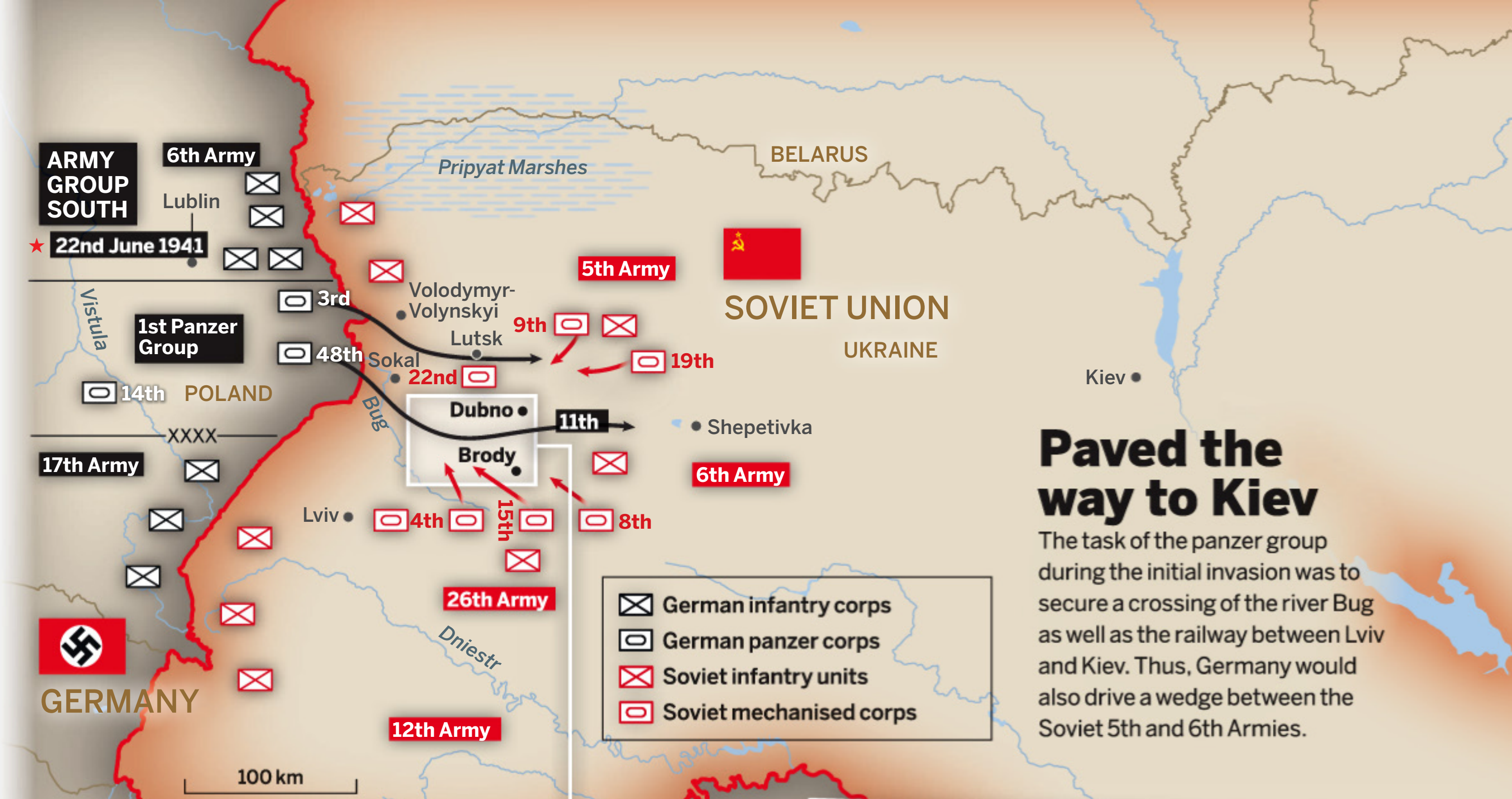
After four days of brutal 'training on the job', Soviet counter-attacks began in earnest. Kirponos's sledgehammer – the 8th and 15th Mechanised Corps – attacked from the south to strike the 16th Panzer Division along the line of Kleist's southern spearhead. Once again, the Soviet heavy tanks proved impossible to stop, but this time they also had the support of both aircraft and artillery. The 16th Panzer Division suffered heavy losses and was pushed back, exposing the rear of the 11th Panzer Division, which had moved further east from Dubno. At the same time, the 9th and 10th Mechanised Corps attacked Kleist's northern line of attack. But these Soviet corps, which had few modern tanks, were slowly driven backwards.

DURING THE NIGHT, Soviet tank units did successfully complete two complicated manoeuvres. The 19th Corps withdrew from its front to advance into the gap left behind the 11th Panzer Division from the north. At the same time, the 8th Corps also detached itself to advance into the gap from the south. It was becoming increasingly clear how differently Soviet units handled pressure. Some continued to function as units, while others such as the 22nd and 4th Corps, collapsed into fragments. It depended hugely on the commander – for example, Dmitry Ryabyshev, who led the 8th Corps, would personally lead attacks throughout the war.

“ON 25TH JUNE, THE 11TH PANZER DIVISION ROLLED INTO DUBNO”

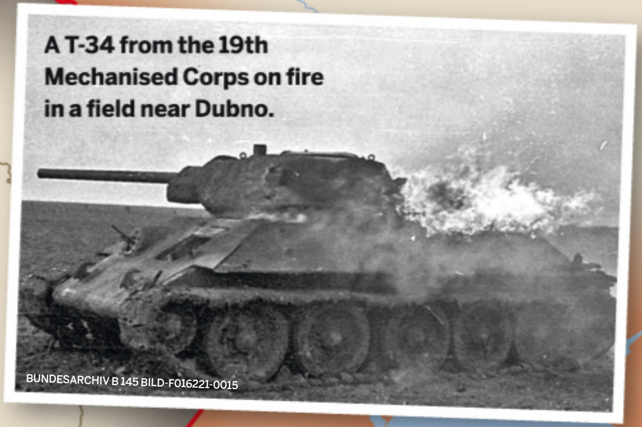
On 27th June, north of the Pripyat Marshes, the huge Minsk pocket was closed, capturing 350,000 Soviet soldiers and destroying over 4,500 tanks. But south of the marshes, von Rundstedt described the situation as “serious”. As dawn broke, 200 heavy tanks from the 8th Corps attacked the rear of the 11th Panzer Division, pursuing the tanks and infantry in front of them. It was a powerful attack and potentially the only time in history the giant Soviet T-35 tanks came into combat. The tanks reached Dubno, defended by hastily assembled German units. Meanwhile, further west, the 15th Corps attacked German infantry that had hurried forward to protect the German advance's long flank. These battles were inconclusive, however, and the Germans began to drive back the Soviet forces.

THE FOLLOWING DAY, more battles – increasingly chaotic – were fought. Both sides' planes hunted over the battlefields, not always


ARMY GROUP SOUTH
6th Army
Lublin
22nd June 1941
Vistula
3rd
1st Panzer Group
48th
14th
POLAND
XXXX
17th Army
GERMANY
Pripyat Marshes
BELARUS
5th Army
SOVIET UNION
UKRAINE
Volodymyr-Volynskyi
Lutsk
9th
19th
Sokal
22nd
Bug
Dubno
11th
Brody
Shepetivka
6th Army
Kiev
Lviv
4th
15th
8th
26th Army
Dniestr
12th Army
100 km
☒ German infantry corps
▭ German panzer corps
☒ Soviet infantry units
▭ Soviet mechanised corps

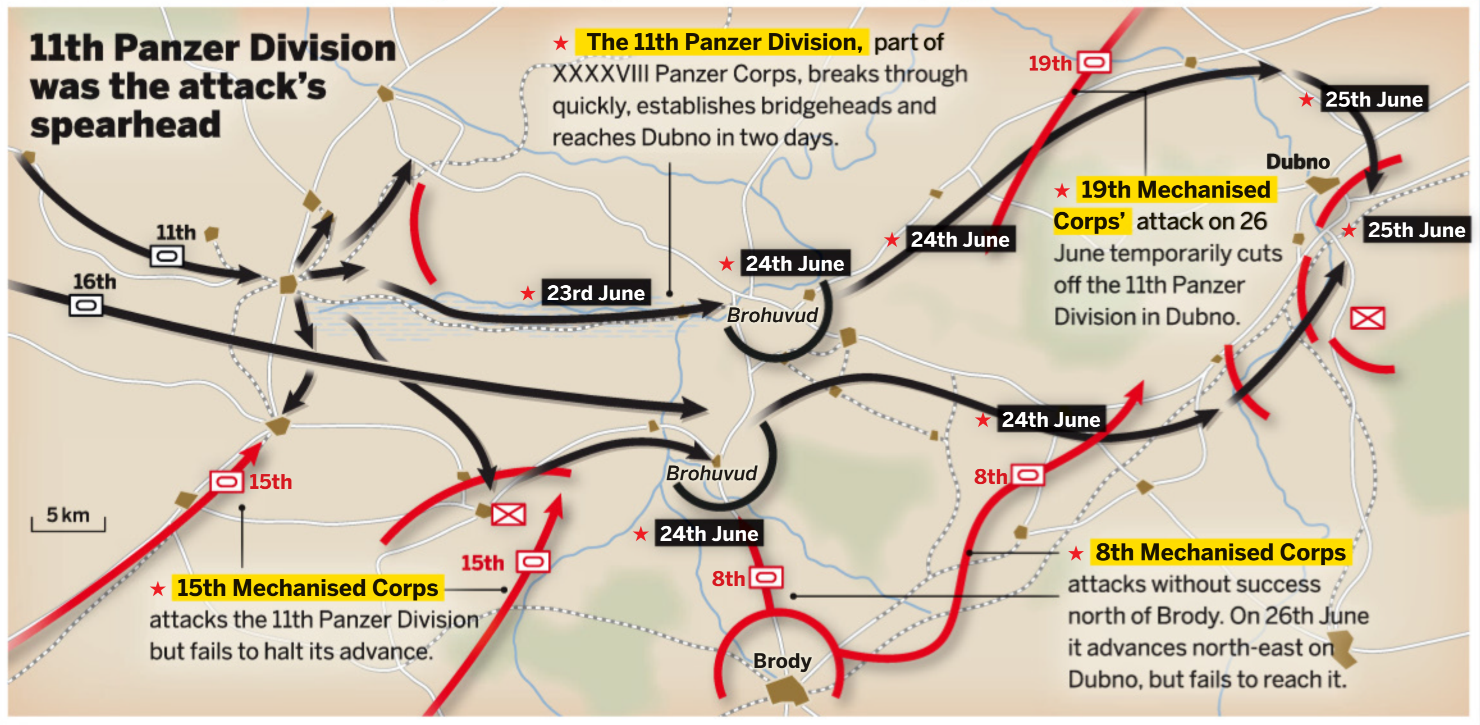
Paved the way to Kiev

The task of the panzer group during the initial invasion was to secure a crossing of the river Bug as well as the railway between Lviv and Kiev. Thus, Germany would also drive a wedge between the Soviet 5th and 6th Armies.



A T-34 from the 19th Mechanised Corps on fire in a field near Dubno.

BUNDESARCHIV B 145 BILD-F016221-0015



11th Panzer Division was the attack's spearhead

★ The 11th Panzer Division, part of XXXXVIII Panzer Corps, breaks through quickly, establishes bridgeheads and reaches Dubno in two days.

★ 19th Mechanised Corps' attack on 26 June temporarily cuts off the 11th Panzer Division in Dubno.

★ 15th Mechanised Corps attacks the 11th Panzer Division but fails to halt its advance.

★ 8th Mechanised Corps attacks without success north of Brody. On 26th June it advances north-east on Dubno, but fails to reach it.

11th
16th
★ 23rd June
Brohuvud
★ 24th June
★ 24th June
19th
★ 25th June
Dubno
★ 25th June
★ 24th June
8th
Brohuvud
15th
5 km
15th
★ 24th June
8th
Brody

A tank column from the 11th German Panzer Division passes a destroyed Soviet BT-7 tank on Ukrainian roads in late summer 1941.

ULLSTEIN/GETTY

distinguishing between friend and foe. The 11th Panzer Division was cut off and could do little more than defend itself. This was the chance for Kirponos's tank units to crush the German advance, but rapidly marching German infantry penetrated ever deeper behind the 8th Mechanised Corps, which now found its own rear under threat. While German units filled up with new troops, Soviet reserves, such as the 37th Rifle Division, remained some distance from the fighting, waiting for orders that never came. In the north-east, the Soviet 9th and 19th Corps launched additional minor attacks but were slowly driven backwards. Later that afternoon, the 15th Corps attacked with almost 200 BT-7 tanks, but instead of coming to the aid of the increasingly pressured 8th Corps, the attack was launched further west against well-prepared German infantry.

ON 29TH JUNE, the Germans had managed to maintain a continuous front, filled with ever-increasing numbers of infantry. The air battles had almost been settled in the Luftwaffe's favour, and the Germans received more and more air support. The 11th Panzer Division was rescued without drama at the same time the Soviet mechanised corps' headquarters was taken out by an air strike, leaving the corps with just two radios.

In the 8th Mechanised Corps, 20 modern tanks were left standing after their fuel finally ran out – they'd done everything that could have been asked of them. North of their position, it's said Konstantin Rokossovsky, commanding the 9th Mechanised Corps, refused to attack again because he had no tanks left to attack with. The corps next to him had just 30 remaining from its original 450.

THE NIGHT OF 29th-30th June saw Lviv collapse. The Soviet 6th Army withdrew to avoid being surrounded. Around Dubno, the fighting died down. The remaining Soviet tank soldiers at Dubno blew up their surviving tanks and retreated on foot, some not meeting up with their units until a month later. The Germans salvaged and repaired their own tanks, but the Red Army lacked the manpower to

"THE SOVIET 6TH ARMY WITHDREW TO AVOID BEING SURROUNDED"

HISTORIE ARCHIVE

Konstantin Rokossovsky in 1945.

Unequal combatants

★ Surprisingly, the Germans' perceived armoured superiority in 1941 did not tell the whole story. More than half its complement of tanks were smaller, light models – either Panzer I and Panzer II tanks or similar Czech variants. Only 40% were considered modern, and only one in five had guns that could compete with the powerful Soviet T-34.

It would not be until the spring of 1942 – when the 75-millimetre L/43 gun was first mounted on the Panzer IV – that the Germans could face the Red Army on equal terms. In the summer of 1941, both the T-34 and the KV-1 were far superior to most German tanks in every way. If the Red Army had deployed the same high levels of training, maintenance and radio communications, the Germans wouldn't have stood a chance.

In addition to two of the world's most powerful tanks, the Soviet tank fleet contained many other interesting models. There were masses of light T-26 tanks that were good, but outdated. There were plenty of T-27 tanks, too, but these were considered so poor they were rarely deployed in battle. Smaller numbers of T-37A and T-40 amphibious tanks were used for reconnaissance. Their chassis was based on the BT tank series, which was succeeded by the T-34, a fast vehicle with good manoeuvrability.

There were also several heavy tanks: the KV-2 with a howitzer mounted in an enormous turret, the T-28 with three turrets, and the T-35 with five turrets and a crew of ten. The 40 T-35s in the Soviet arsenal took part in the fighting around Brody, but rarely came to actual blows. They broke down or ran out of fuel, and after the battles received lots of attention from curious German soldiers who wanted to be photographed next to them for posterity.

German soldiers inspect a destroyed KV-2 tank.

HISTORIE ARCHIVE

repair its own combat vehicles. If one developed even the slightest fault, it was often abandoned.

On 30th June, Stalin approved Kirponos's withdrawal to the old Soviet-Polish border. But there were few tanks left to pull out of the battle. The Luftwaffe pursed the retreating units relentlessly.

The last act of the battle was a farce. On 1st July 1941, more than 200 tanks from the 22nd Mechanised Corps finally escaped the marshes they'd been trapped in for a week and were ordered to attack Kleist's northern flank immediately. In a replay of earlier actions, they missed the flank and found themselves pursuing the rear of the German spearhead until the Luftwaffe dropped over the columns of tanks. The battle was over.

The Southwestern Front was permitted to retreat to the so-called Stalin Line, with the Germans on their heels. On 5th July, the Germans broke through this line and within a couple of weeks had encircled the Southwestern Front at Uman; 100,000 Soviet soldiers fell and as many were captured.

THE BATTLE OF Dubno was without doubt the toughest battle fought during the opening of Operation Barbarossa. But even if Kleist's units had been bruised, they were still able to continue to Kiev. The panzer group lost up to 200 tanks, half of which could be salvaged and repaired. The Southwestern Front lost over 3,000 tanks. At the same time, the Soviets lost over 1,500 planes, while the German losses numbered fewer than one hundred.

There were many lessons to be learned. The Germans were shocked to discover that modern Soviet tanks were difficult to disable using the anti-tank weapons currently at their disposal. At the same time, the Soviets' inability to include both infantry and artillery in major armoured attacks meant their superior tanks were still vulnerable. The Soviet mechanised divisions had proven difficult to command, so were replaced by much smaller – but more flexible and easily led – mechanised corps. One of the drivers behind this development was General Rokossovsky, who'd led the 9th Corps at Dubno. He would get his revenge on the victors at Dubno when, in November 1942, he led the massive counter-attack that surrounded the 1st Panzer Group in Stalingrad. ★

Anders Fager is a military history writer.

Further reading: Dubno 1941 (2017) by Aleksei Isaev. Interesting and detailed account despite clumsy translation and pro-Soviet angle.

Operation Platinum Fox 1941

GERMANY'S FIRST DEFEAT

Operation Platinum Fox's goal, to conquer Murmansk, was part of a larger strategy to secure the mines in Petsamo. But poor planning and ill-considered decisions resulted in Germany's first operational setbacks of World War II.

Text: **MAGNUS OLOFSSON**

YEVGENY KHALDEI/AKG/RITZAU SCANPIX

Yevgeny Khaldei, best known for his image of the Soviet flag hoisted over the Reichstag in Berlin, photographed this reindeer during a German air strike in Murmansk. The effect was not as dramatic as he had hoped, so he later added bomb craters and British Hawker Hurricanes in the background.

At 03.00 on 29th June 1941, Operation Platinum Fox began when German mountain troops stormed over the border between Finland and the Soviet Union on the Arctic coast. They certainly didn't lack confidence. "Morale was high and the mood boisterous," said Captain Hans Rüf later. "The mountain troops were eager to enter battle." To the south, in central Europe, Operation Barbarossa was on its eighth day and German armoured personnel carriers had already penetrated 300 kilometres into the Soviet Union.

In the north, two divisions of well-trained and combat-experienced mountain troops would, of course, make short work of the Red Army's 'subhumans'. The victory banquet was scheduled to take place at Hotel Arktika in Murmansk on 20th July. The invitations were already printed.

But the Germans had forgotten what their number-one authority on war, 19th-century General Helmuth von Moltke, had said: "No plan survives the first contact with the enemy." The Soviet 14th Army put up an unexpectedly strong resistance and the terrain was terrible, even worse than previously thought. There were problems with Platinum Fox; bad decision was followed by bad decision. There was no victory party in Murmansk, either on 20th July 20 or any time later. Instead, Operation Platinum Fox ended with the German Army's first operational defeat of World War II.

THE GERMAN MOUNTAIN troops would never have attacked north of the Arctic Circle if it hadn't been for the local nickel deposits. Germany suffered a worrying shortage of several strategic raw materials. One was oil, another nickel. However, Germany's entire war requirements could be fulfilled by the Finnish Kolosjoki mine near Petsamo (now Pechenga in modern-day Russia), about ten kilometres from the German-occupied Norwegian border and a few more from the Soviet border.

In the summer of 1940, Hitler began to fear a Soviet attack on Finland. When he decided to invade the Soviet Union at the end of July 1940, the protection of the nickel mines in Petsamo was a major factor.

At that time, there were only small German guard units in Finnmark, in northern Norway, who were ill equipped to prevent a Soviet advance. On 13th August 1940, a brief meeting was held in Berlin between the Führer and the 'conqueror' of Norway, Colonel General Nikolaus von Falkenhorst, to discuss the issue. Ten minutes later, the *Gebirgskorps Norwegen* (Mountain Corps Norway), under the command of Eduard Dietl, was ordered to start shipping the 2nd Mountain Division to Kirkenes in Finnmark. The division was ordered to plan a rapid occupation of the Petsamo area under the code name Operation Reindeer. At the end of August, the division was ready for action along the Norwegian-Finnish border.

THEN NOTHING HAPPENED on the Northern Front. Planning for the attack on the Soviet Union continued during the autumn. On Wednesday 18th December, Hitler wrote Führer Directive 21, "Operation Barbarossa", in which he declared his intention to "crush Soviet Russia in a quick campaign". Preparations were to be completed on 15th May 1941. He coldly – and quite correctly – expected Finland to take part in the campaign on Germany's side.

The directive commissioned Gebirgskorps Norwegen to secure the Petsamo area in order to "then advance, in conjunction with Finnish forces, against the Murmansk railway and … cut the Murmansk area's land supply routes".

It came as a surprise to the men who were given the mission: Falkenhorst and Dietl. Their staffs soon came to the conclusion that it was not quite as easy to advance 140 kilometres from the Finnish border to Kola Bay as it looked on the map tables in Berlin. The terrain was an almost road-free tundra: a swathe of windswept hills, swampy valleys and tangled mountain forests, perfect for defensive combat. Getting supplies to the front would be a huge challenge.

Dietl, a dedicated Nazi and good friend of Hitler, expressed his concerns to the Führer in a private conversation, which resulted in Hitler adding reinforcements instead of cancelling the operation.

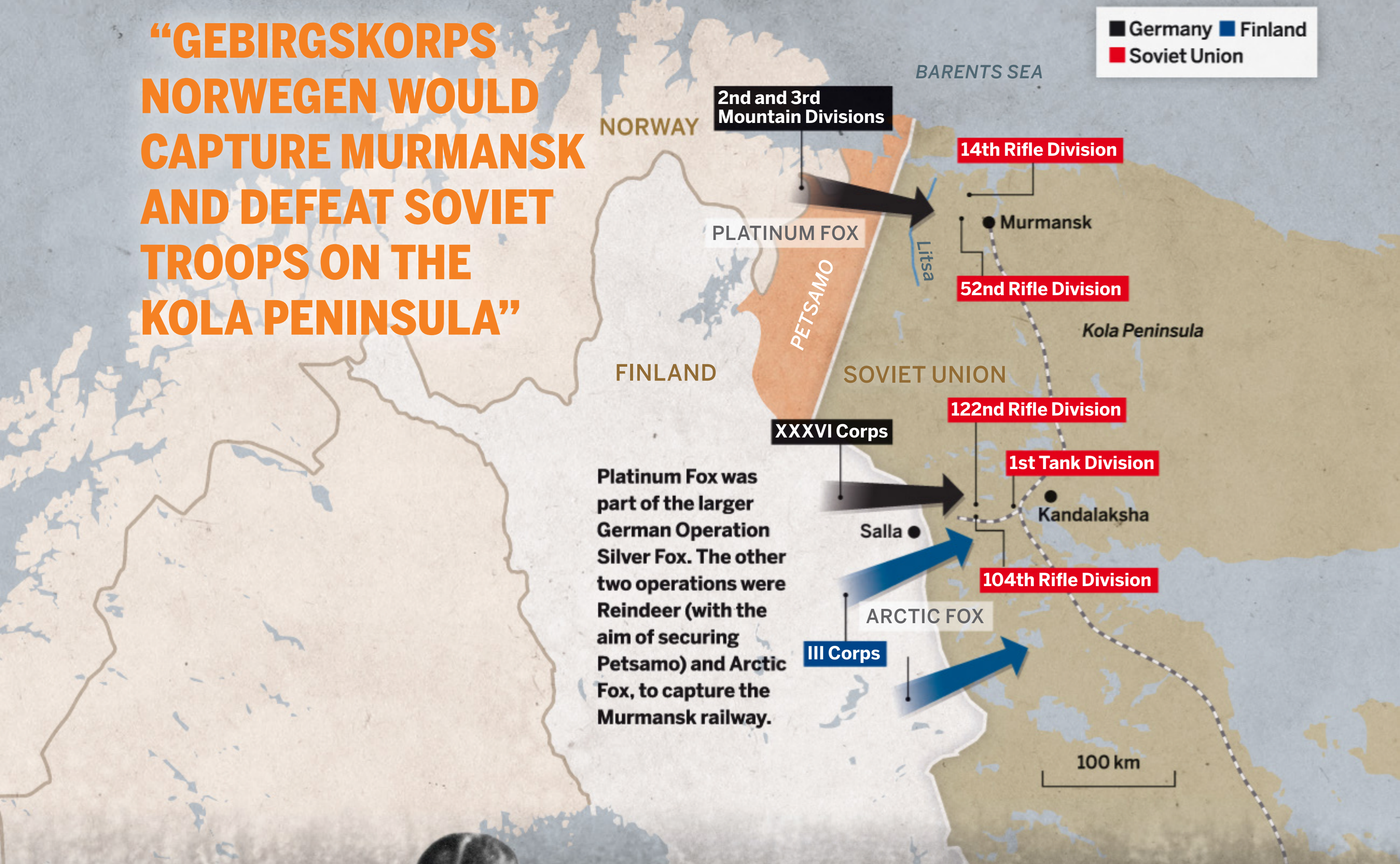
PLANNING CONTINUED. Falkenhorst's staff developed a strategy for an operation they named Silver Fox, a pincer manoeuvre with two arms separated by 300 kilometres of wilderness. The northern arm was Operation Platinum Fox. The southern arm was the operation's centre of gravity, and went by the name Arctic Fox. Under it, the German XXXVI Corps, supported by the Finnish III Corps, would advance into the Soviet Union at Salla and cut off the railway line to Murmansk at Kandalaksha. Then some of the forces, together with Gebirgskorps Norwegen, would attack north along the railway to capture Murmansk and defeat the Soviet troops on the Kola ►

BUNDESARCHIV_BILD_146-1984-019-20

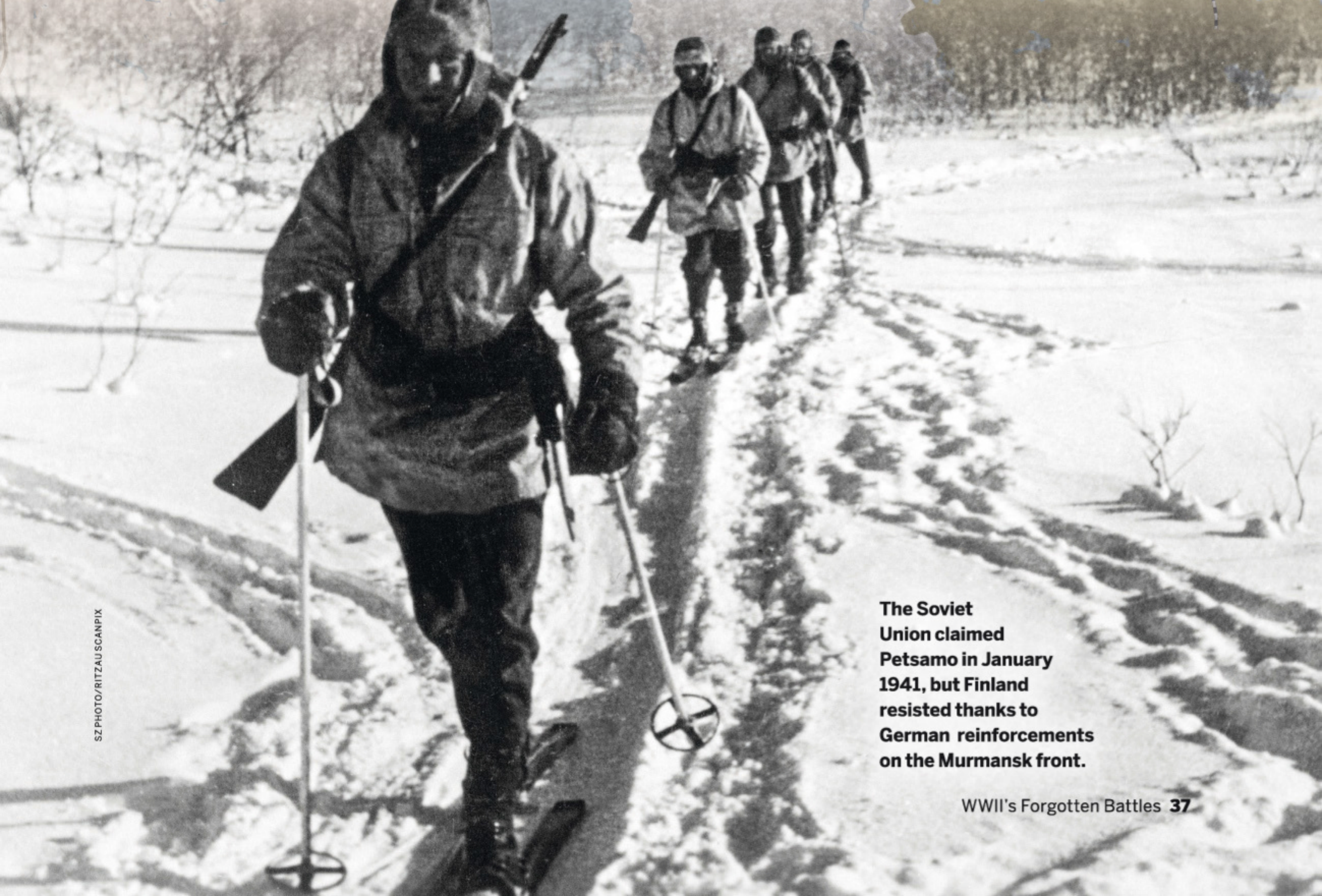
SA-KUVA

Eduard Dietl (top) was given the task of leading the offensive against Murmansk. Nikolaus von Falkenhorst (below) led Operation Arctic Fox.

> “GEBIRGSKORPS NORWEGEN WOULD CAPTURE MURMANSK AND DEFEAT SOVIET TROOPS ON THE KOLA PENINSULA”


■ Germany ■ Finland
■ Soviet Union
BARENTS SEA
NORWAY
2nd and 3rd Mountain Divisions
14th Rifle Division
Murmansk
PLATINUM FOX
Litsa
PETSAMO
52nd Rifle Division
Kola Peninsula
FINLAND
SOVIET UNION
122nd Rifle Division
XXXVI Corps
1st Tank Division
Kandalaksha
Salla
104th Rifle Division
ARCTIC FOX
III Corps
100 km

Platinum Fox was part of the larger German Operation Silver Fox. The other two operations were Reindeer (with the aim of securing Petsamo) and Arctic Fox, to capture the Murmansk railway.



SZ PHOTO/RITZAU SCANPIX

The Soviet Union claimed Petsamo in January 1941, but Finland resisted thanks to German reinforcements on the Murmansk front.

Peninsula, while the rest advanced south to support the Finnish Army on both sides of Lake Ladoga.

Eventually, Operation Reindeer began, half an hour before Operation Barbarossa broke loose many kilometres to the south. More than 27,000 men from the 2nd and 3rd Mountain Divisions marched into Finland. By lunchtime, the nickel mines were secured. The mountain troops moved on to the Soviet border and stopped. It was important not to reveal the fact that Finland was mobilising to go to war on Germany's side or draw attention to the advance of the XXXVI Corps. As three million Wehrmacht soldiers, supported by thousands of planes and tanks, invaded the Soviet Union, from the Baltic Sea in the north to the Black Sea in the south, a deceptive week-long calm reigned along the Finnish-Soviet border.

THERE WAS THICK fog when Platinum Fox launched a few hours after midnight on 29th June. On the other side of the border was a regiment from the Soviet 14th Rifle Division. It was quickly beaten by the two elite German divisions. The commander fell; the soldiers fled east. A German battalion reached the River Litsa just over 20 kilometres from the border – about a third of the way between the Finnish-Norwegian border and Murmansk.

While the operation went well on the main front, problems arose on the left flank, where the Fisher Peninsula stuck out into the Arctic Ocean just a few kilometres into the Soviet Union. It was connected to the mainland by a five-kilometre-wide isthmus, from which Soviet forces could attack the Gebirgskorps Norwegen from the rear. Dietl wanted to occupy the peninsula, but it covered an area the size of Greater London, and securing it with Soviet landings would require an entire division. He had to settle for deploying a battalion of mountain troops to isolate it. But the isthmus was protected by a reinforced rifle regiment that resisted so fiercely that a second battalion had to be deployed to secure the army corps' flank.

“THEY GOT STUCK IN A DEADLY FIRESTORM FROM SOVIET DEFENSIVE POSITIONS”

HISTORIEARKIV

Valerian Frolov was commander of the 14th Army in Murmansk.

Despite this, Dietl was optimistic. On 1st July, the 2nd Mountain Division noted: “The 14th Division is defeated. Unless new forces are brought into action by the Russians, there is little reason to fear noteworthy resistance before we reach Murmansk.” The supply situation caused more trouble than the Soviets. Pack animals and maintenance crews had to carry everything over rocks and bogs. Before there could be talk of crossing the Litsa, the operations had to be paused in order to bring artillery, ammunition and provisions to the front.

THE DEFENCE OF Murmansk was led by Lieutenant General Valerian Alexandrovich Frolov, an energetic and efficient man, and an expert on infantry tactics. He used the respite to advance the 52nd Rifle Division, one of the Red Army's best, to the front from the Kola Peninsula.

When Gebirgskorps Norwegen went on the attack on the morning of 6th July to storm the Litsa, the Red Army was ready. The mountain troops managed to beat the Soviet forces west of the river, but got stuck just a kilometre from the shore on the other side. “There were snipers hidden among the boulders, and the machine guns hammered at us from well-camouflaged positions on the summits.

ARCHIVE IN NORDLAND

Mountain troops rest during Operation Reindeer on their way to Petsamo.

Red Army's elite

★ The 52nd Rifle Division was one of the best in the Red Army. When war broke out, it was in superb shape. "The 205th and 58th Regiments are among the elite units of the Red Army," reported German Major Eduard Zorn. The units were built around a core of veterans of the Winter War. In March 1941, less able men were replaced by healthy, well-trained soldiers. Zorn claimed that there were many fanatical "Bolsheviks" in the division and that "there are none of them among our prisoners". On 26th December, the division became one of the first to be promoted to 'guards' status. As the 10th Guards Division, it fought in the Arctic until the end of 1944, after which it participated in the invasion of Germany. At the end of the war, it fought on Usedom on the Baltic coast. It was disbanded in March 1992.

Every single emplacement had to be taken in hand-to-hand combat," said Captain Vilhelm Hess.

The Red Army soon launched a counter-attack, supported by tanks and artillery. The Germans found they had too few dinghies to support their hard-pressed bridgeheads. Dietl had another headache: thanks to their naval supremacy, the enemy was able to land troops on the coast north-west of the Litsa estuary. Both his front and flank were collapsing. At 23.00 on 7th July, after a day and a half, he halted the operation.

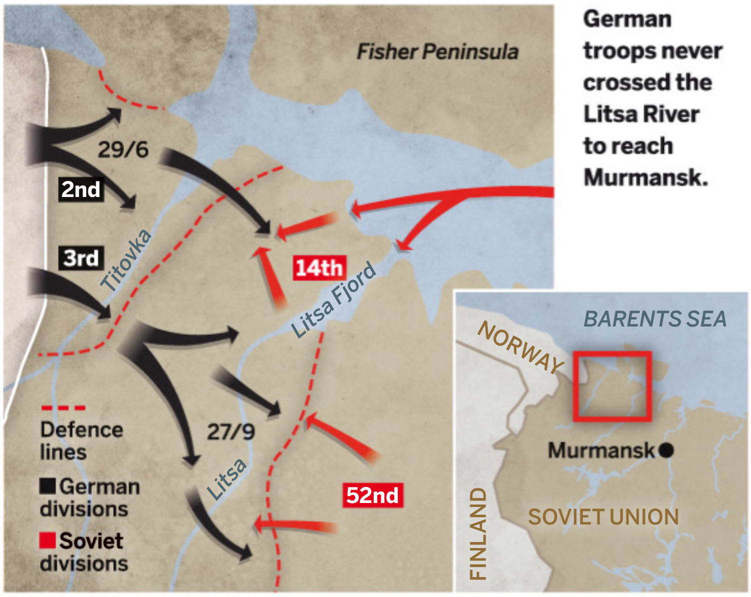
To secure his sea flank, Dietl put in a call to Falkenhorst's chief of staff in Rovaniemi, saying: "One regiment is not enough, but a new division will guarantee the outcome." He criticised the whole Silver Fox concept of two prongs of attack. "All the forces should be concentrated in the north. If I get sufficient back-up forces and air support, the capture of Murmansk will be guaranteed."

And he got reinforcements: a German motorised machine-gun battalion, a Finnish infantry regiment, and a squadron of Stuka bombers. With them came the order to carry out a fresh attack on 13th July.

Victory telegrams from the Eastern Front reported that hundreds of thousands of Soviet soldiers had been killed or had surrendered, thousands of Soviet aircraft and tanks had been destroyed, and German troops were advancing unabated everywhere. The mountain troops – and Dietl – went on the offensive with renewed confidence.

AT 22.40 ON 12th July, the operation began. A vanguard crossed the river to cover the passage. In the morning, the mountain troops attacked. The main Soviet forces were grouped on high ground some distance from the Litsa and the Germans were able to advance five kilometres. There they got stuck in a deadly firestorm from Soviet defensive positions. Then the Red Army launched a counter-attack. Bloody and bitter melee battles raged in hollows and on knolls. The losses were great on both sides; neither got the upper hand.

And Frolov had his trump card: control of the sea. He scraped together 1,500 men from one of the 14th Rifle Division's regiments, along with volunteers from the navy, and landed them at the far end of the Litsa Fjord. They attacked at the same time as the 325th Rifle Regiment began an assault from the Fisher Peninsula isthmus. Dietl could only confirm that his second attempt in two days to cross the Litsa faced the same problems as the first: the supply situation was bleak, the attack force came from nowhere, and his sea flank was threatened. Late in the afternoon of 16th July, he stopped the offensive. Gebirgskorps Norwegen was ordered to fall back to a bridgehead near the river to shorten the front and release forces to clear the sea flank.



German troops never crossed the Litsa River to reach Murmansk.

"IT IS IMPOSSIBLE to continue the attack without significant reinforcements," Dietl explained to his superiors on 17th July. "The corps is without reserves on a front 60 kilometres long ... The troops are exhausted and have suffered heavy losses."

He needed at least one more division, he explained. Instead of accepting that the operation was a mistake, Falkenhorst pushed to strengthen Dietl. And those higher up listened. A machine-gun battalion, a motorcycle battalion, a reinforced infantry regiment and a motorised SS regiment were sent from Norway, equating to an entire division. ►

And far away in Greece, the 6th Mountain Division received Hitler's order to move towards Kirkenes.

While waiting for the reinforcements, Dietl defeated the Soviet forces between the Fisher Peninsula and the mouth of the Litsa. Frolov, however, was not content to just sit and wait, but let the 14th Army wear down the German troops at the bridgehead in continuous small battles. It was not until mid-August that the 14th Army switched to the defensive. The Soviet battalions were by then the size of companies. The area was covered with dead men and animals, stinking in the summer heat.

AT 03.00 ON 8th September, Gebirgskorps Norwegen began its third attempt to cross the Litsa and advance towards Murmansk, with a ten-minute artillery bombardment of 49 heavy guns. At 14.45, a call reached HQ: "*Gruppe Daser* has suffered severe losses and requests permission to withdraw to the left bank before the whole force is eliminated."

Each central attack ended in failure on the first day. On the flanks, the mountain troops advanced, albeit desperately slowly. At 21.00, Dietl and his staff received the news that the convoy shipping the 6th Mountain Division had been attacked by British cruisers off the coast of Norway. It now had to march by road and wouldn't be in position for several weeks. But the offensive had to continue. A few kilometres from the Litsa, the Red Army's resistance intensified. On 15th September, the German troops on the front were exhausted. Without the 6th Mountain Division, they wouldn't be able to defeat the enemy. Frolov launched fresh attacks from the Fisher Peninsula and threw in

German soldiers at a destroyed Soviet bunker between the Titovka river and the Litsa Fjord, June 1941.

new troops, the Polarnoje Division, at the main front. It consisted mostly of untrained and partially unarmed Gulag prisoners, but the Germans didn't know that; they only saw how the enemy became stronger, while their own supply problems haunted them again. On 18th September, Dietl suspended the offensive. The 14th Army had defeated Gebirgskorps Norwegen and Operation Platinum Fox was over.

OPERATION PLATINUM FOX lasted almost two months. At the cost of 12,490 fallen, wounded and captured, Gebirgskorps Norwegen managed to advance 27 of the 90 kilometres to Murmansk. The failure was largely due to the inability to supply a force strong enough to carry out the task on a tundra terrain that lacked proper roads. The Germans also misjudged the defensive advantages of the terrain, the Red Army's combat strength, and the effect of the enemy's naval supremacy. They also violated one of their most important operational principles when they added a large number of reinforcements to the subordinate operation, Platinum Fox, instead of reinforcing Operation Arctic Fox, which had been designated Silver Fox's centre of gravity.

Platinum Fox had a better chance of success, but got stuck just over ten kilometres from the Murmansk railway due to a lack of strength. And, ironically, Stalin had no plans to attack Petsamo. Capturing Murmansk was, in any case, superfluous, because if Barbarossa went according to plan, the city would still fall. Operation Platinum Fox was not only ill considered – it was unnecessary.

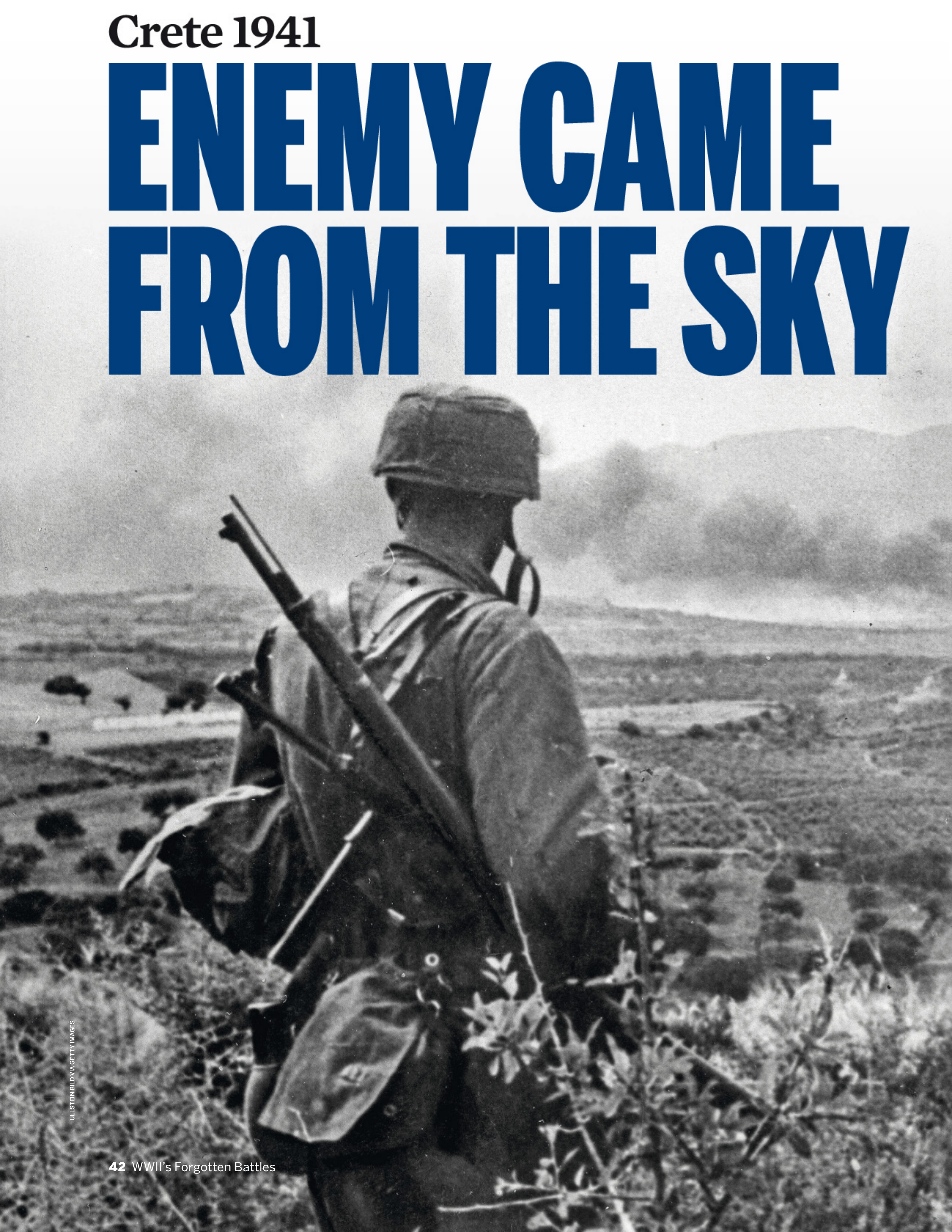
Magnus Olofsson is an historian.

Further reading: The Miracle at the Litza: Hitler's First Defeat on the Eastern Front (2014) by Alf R Jacobsen ★ **Führer Directive 21**, available on Wikisource in German and English.

FINE ART IMAGES/RITZAU SCANPIX

Crete 1941

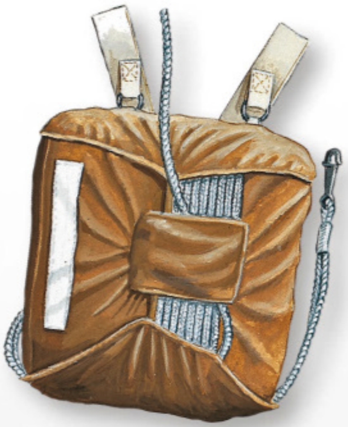
ENEMY CAME FROM THE SKY



ULLSTEIN BILD VIA GETTY IMAGES

In May 1941, the sky over the island of Crete filled with thousands of parachutes. Germany's well-trained troops had launched a bold unprecedented attack: the first invasion in history made solely from the air.

Text: **BORIS KOLL & NADIA CLAUDI**



RZ16 Parachute

★ The RZ16 parachute was designed to land Germans safely. Unfortunately, it had no manual controls.

British and Greek troops were on their way to breakfast when the silence was suddenly broken by the howls of the island's air sirens. Shortly afterwards, the alarms fell silent, but soon they started up again. This was the signal: the long-awaited German invasion of Crete had begun. It was just before 08.00 on 20th May 1941. Soon, a faint hum could be heard, rapidly increasing in volume. Hundreds of German planes in close formation appeared over the horizon. As they drew closer, it was though the air itself shook from this huge demonstration of strength from the well-oiled German war machine.

Private Peter Butler was stationed near Maleme airfield on the north-western tip of Crete: "There was perhaps a minute's awestruck inactivity while people realised what was going on, then firing ►

Two German paratroopers gaze out towards the coast after landing in Crete in the summer of 1941.

started from all over the area," he would later recall.

THE BRITISH OPENED fire with everything they had: Bofors anti-aircraft guns, machine guns and regular firearms. The sounds of crackling machine-gun salvos were everywhere, mixed in with the characteristic howl of diving German Stuka bombers and the roar of exploding bombs. The Stukas were followed by waves of Ju 52 transport aircraft, each one crammed with paratroopers. From the ground, the British saw the open hatches spewing out long lines of soldiers. Suddenly the sky was filled with thousands of parachutes.

In the spring of 1941, the Wehrmacht seemed invincible. It had taken Poland, France, Belgium, Norway and Denmark in short order, and almost succeeded in capturing the British Army at Dunkirk. In Greece, history repeated itself: the invading Germans forced the Greeks and their allies to retreat – and the Royal Navy evacuated thousands of beaten soldiers to Crete.

As the Germans switched their attention to the Soviet Union, Hitler's general staff found itself distracted by the British and Greek forces holding Crete. From the island, British bombers would be able to reach all the way to the Romanian oil fields at Ploiesti – the Germans' main source of crude oil.

The Luftwaffe, which wanted to atone for its defeat in the Battle of Britain the year before, offered to take care of the problem. For the operation, it deployed just over ten thousand men from the 1st Parachute Division, part of its elite force of *Fallschirmjäger* (paratroopers).

The invasion of Crete was code-named 'Operation Mercury'. The plan was relatively simple: the Fallschirmjäger would capture at least one of three airfields on the northern side of Crete and hold them until reinforcements could be shipped over from the Greek mainland by transport plane. Before the invasion itself, the Luftwaffe would crush the RAF in Crete or chase them off to North Africa.

THE GERMANS HAD a clear plan, but it was based on inaccurate intelligence. Major General Kurt Student, the Fallschirmjäger's commander, was counting on there being minimal resistance from the enemy on the ground. He planned everything based on claims there were no more than 10,000 Allied troops on the island, along with the remnants of ten Greek divisions. In reality, however, the figure was much higher: 32,000 Britons, Australians and New Zealanders, as well as 10,000 Greek soldiers and thousands of Cretan civilians, who would fight to the last for their island.

SHUTTERSTOCK

M1935 helmet

★ The M1935 helmet was developed specifically for German paratroopers. Unlike the army's standard helmet, there was no projecting visor or deep, flared rim to reduce drag and lessen potential neck trauma.

In contrast, the British were well informed and knew what they faced. The Allies had intercepted encrypted messages revealing that, in addition to an invasion from the sea, the Germans also intended to use paratroopers to capture Crete.

Despite this, the British generals couldn't have imagined the scale of the airborne invasion. Major General Freyberg, who led the British forces, was convinced that the main attack would come from the sea rather than the air. Although combat-ready forces were placed at the airfields, many solders were held back in reserve to meet the seaborne invaders.

While the Germans had underestimated the enemy's strength, the British were looking in the wrong direction. Both would pay a heavy price.

AS THE CLOCK ticked around to 10.30 on 20th May, another company of paratroopers approached from the Greek mainland. Through the square windows of one of the Ju 52 transport planes, Major Rudolf Witzig and his men could see the sparkling blue sea. Formations comprising hundreds of aircraft accompanied them, each one housing 10-12 paratroopers and four weapons containers. Witzig, a veteran of Eben-Emael, commanded 144 men from 9th Company, 3rd Parachute Battalion.

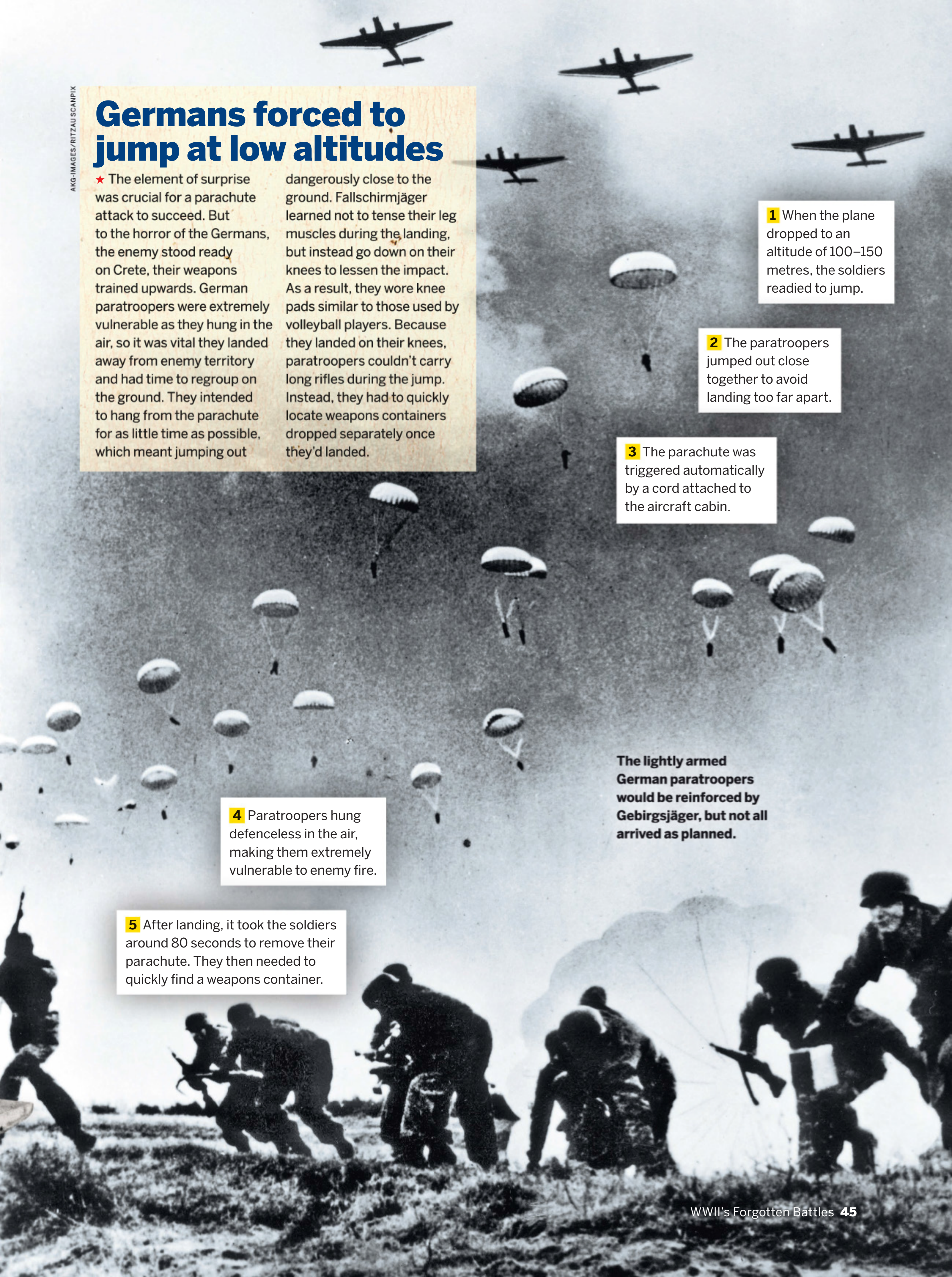
The battalion's task was to secure the airfield at Maleme. Many of its soldiers were on their way to

Medical supplies collected after being dropped from the plane.

BUNDESARCHIV, BILD 141-0865 / CC-BY-SA 3.0

Germans forced to jump at low altitudes

★ The element of surprise was crucial for a parachute attack to succeed. But to the horror of the Germans, the enemy stood ready on Crete, their weapons trained upwards. German paratroopers were extremely vulnerable as they hung in the air, so it was vital they landed away from enemy territory and had time to regroup on the ground. They intended to hang from the parachute for as little time as possible, which meant jumping out dangerously close to the ground. Fallschirmjäger learned not to tense their leg muscles during the landing, but instead go down on their knees to lessen the impact. As a result, they wore knee pads similar to those used by volleyball players. Because they landed on their knees, paratroopers couldn't carry long rifles during the jump. Instead, they had to quickly locate weapons containers dropped separately once they'd landed.



AKG-IMAGES/RITZAU SCANPIX

1 When the plane dropped to an altitude of 100–150 metres, the soldiers readied to jump.

2 The paratroopers jumped out close together to avoid landing too far apart.

3 The parachute was triggered automatically by a cord attached to the aircraft cabin.

4 Paratroopers hung defenceless in the air, making them extremely vulnerable to enemy fire.

5 After landing, it took the soldiers around 80 seconds to remove their parachute. They then needed to quickly find a weapons container.

The lightly armed German paratroopers would be reinforced by Gebirgsjäger, but not all arrived as planned.

SHUTTERSTOCK

their very first combat parachute jump, and no one knew for sure what awaited them on the ground. They'd been told that Crete would be a simple operation – that the Allied soldiers were exhausted and the Cretans passive. But more experienced men – including Witzig – knew the reality could be completely different.

FINALLY, THEY SAW the mountains of Crete rise like a huge fortress on the horizon. As the Germans approached the coast, the plane plunged to an altitude of 100-150 metres. The closer to the ground, the shorter the time the soldiers had to hang in the air, completely vulnerable to enemy fire.

Witzig looked around. All his men were dressed in thick uniforms and knee pads; apparel that stood in stark contrast to the hot summer day. A quarter of the men carried MP 40 machine gun pistols, the others had to make do with a pistol and a knife. As soon as they landed, they'd need to locate their weapons containers and arm themselves as quickly as possible.

The blue sea was replaced by dry, yellow grass and gnarled olive trees, and suddenly the signal came: it was time to jump.

One by one, the men leaped out the door of the plane, and suddenly the air was full of parachutes opening over soldiers, weapons containers and first aid kits. But to their horror, Major Witzig and his men had jumped out directly above the 21st and 23rd New Zealand Battalions, which were standing to the south and east of Maleme Airfield. The paratroopers were now easy prey, and as the defenders fired their weapons, Witzig saw several of his men hanging lifeless from their harnesses. In addition, many who did manage to make it to the ground alive either got tangled in their parachute or were caught in the branches of olive trees. They didn't even have time to raise their weapons before New Zealand soldiers – or Greek civilians, armed only with picks and stones – were on them.

M1924 hand grenade

★ The M1924 grenade has the advantage that it can be thrown more than 30 metres. Ordinary grenades without a handle can only be thrown 15–20 metres. On the downside, the M1924 is difficult to aim and doesn't roll after landing.

WITZIG WAS THE only survivor from his plane, but he suffered severe injuries to his right leg on landing. He managed to drag himself into a bush while most of the unfortunate 3rd Battalion died around him. His leg throbbed with pain, and he decided to try to stay hidden until German reinforcements arrived on the island.

The situation looked somewhat brighter for the Allied troops. New Zealander Sergeant Charles Upham saw dead German soldiers thudding on to the dry grass like heavy sacks and later said:

"Of course the whole object of parachute troops is to land them where there isn't anybody – out of sight. Once they get on the ground and regroup they've always got the very best of weapons and things like that. But while they're in the air – oh, they're the easiest things in the world to bring down."

Those German paratroopers carried by the wind a little further west of Maleme were luckier. They landed in an area less heavily guarded and were able to locate their weapons containers. Here and there they found opportunities to group and build defensive positions. They also managed to capture a bridge that went west across the Tavronitis River. Three more waves of Fallschirmjäger landed in Crete at Chania, Rethymnon and Heraklion airfields. But here, too, the Allies lay in wait, and some German companies were almost completely wiped out. Over the course of the day, 10,000 paratroopers had been dropped over the island, but only just over half remained battle-ready. The Allies retained control of all the airfields, and the Germans had failed to capture a single target. Then the British made a mistake.

THE GERMANS HAD been left with just one possible location where they could hope to gain a foothold in Crete: Maleme Airfield, protected by a battalion of hardy New Zealand soldiers under the command of Lieutenant Colonel LW Andrew.

Andrew and his men from the 22nd Battalion were tasked with more than simply defending the airfield; they also had to hold on to Hill 107, a strategic key point, as well as the village of Maleme and a large area around it. It meant that the 22nd Battalion's

The gun wasn't heavy, so could be easily dropped by parachute and assembled on the ground.

PRIVATFOTO & BUNDESARCHIV, BILD 101I-567-1503E-34 / SCHNEIDERS, TONI / CC-BY-SA 3.0

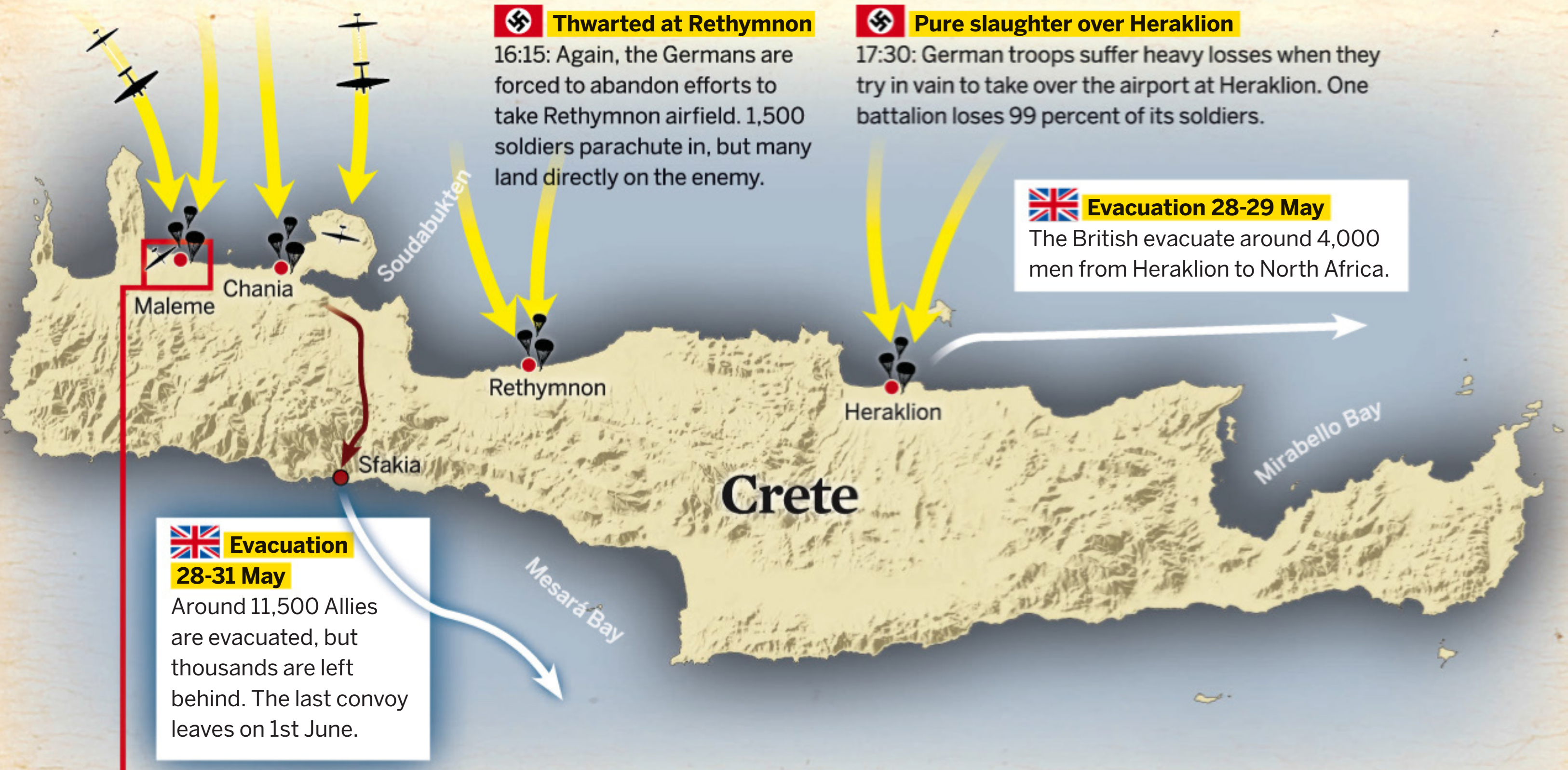
LG 40 recoilless gun

★ The powerful Leichtgeschütz 40 gun received a baptism of fire during the invasion of Crete. This type of weapon, which doesn't recoil when fired, began to be used during World War II. The recoilless effect was achieved by directing most of the kinetic energy from the gunpowder gases out of the back to offset the energy from the pressure driving the shell.

20 May

Victory was costly

★ Crete had three major airfields. If the Germans captured one or more of them, they could take the island. But the task would prove to be much more difficult than German commanders imagined.



Maleme
Chania
Soudabukten
Rethymnon
Heraklion
Sfakia
Crete
Mesará Bay
Mirabello Bay

Tricky landing at Maleme
08.00: The Germans direct their main attack on the airfield at Maleme. Despite heavy losses, some Germans manage to form groups after landing.

Failure at Chania
09:00: Some German troops manage to land safely around the city of Chania but the majority of them are quickly driven back.

Thwarted at Rethymnon
16:15: Again, the Germans are forced to abandon efforts to take Rethymnon airfield. 1,500 soldiers parachute in, but many land directly on the enemy.

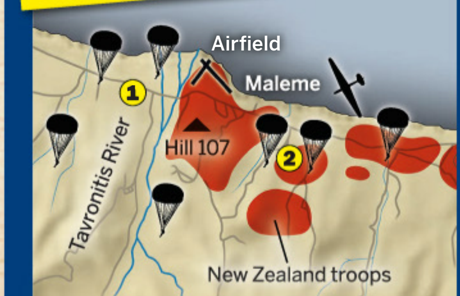
Pure slaughter over Heraklion
17:30: German troops suffer heavy losses when they try in vain to take over the airport at Heraklion. One battalion loses 99 percent of its soldiers.

Evacuation 28-29 May
The British evacuate around 4,000 men from Heraklion to North Africa.

Evacuation 28-31 May
Around 11,500 Allies are evacuated, but thousands are left behind. The last convoy leaves on 1st June.

Maleme Airfield was the battle's turning point

Morning, 20th May



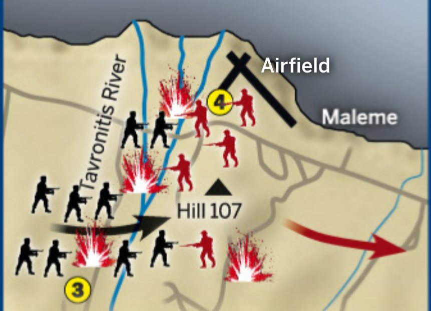
Airfield
Maleme
1
Hill 107
2
Tavronitis River
New Zealand troops

LANDS DIRECTLY ON ENEMY

1 The German paratroopers who land west of the airfield in Maleme have time to organise. They manage to capture the bridge over the Tavronitis River, west of Maleme.

2 East and south of Maleme, the paratroopers suffer heavy losses.

Afternoon, 20th May



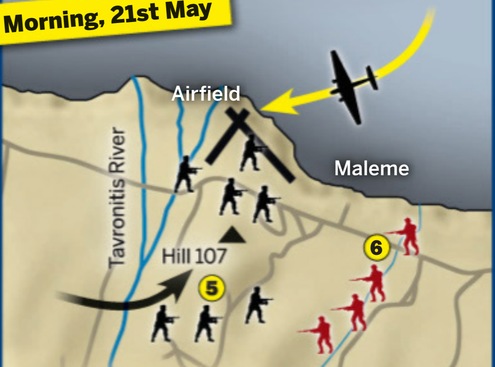
Tavronitis River
Airfield
4
Maleme
Hill 107
3

FIERCE BATTLES OVER HILL 107

3 The Germans regroup in the west and attempt to capture Hill 107 and the airfield, but fail.

4 The New Zealanders are in dire straits and plead for reinforcements – which never arrive.

Morning, 21st May



Airfield
Tavronitis River
Maleme
6
Hill 107
5

AIRFIELD IS TAKEN

5 The paratroopers discover that the enemy has abandoned the hill during the night. They capture the airfield and begin flying in reinforcements.

6 The Allies try to recapture the airfield but are unsuccessful.

troops were dispersed when the paratroopers began to advance in the afternoon of 20th May. Lieutenant Colonel Andrew was conflicted. He founded it difficult to maintain contact with his own companies and lacked an overview of the overall situation across the island. The temperature nudged 50° Celsius in the shade, and the sun beat down relentlessly on the exhausted New Zealand soldiers. Many had already fallen in battle, while Andrew himself was wounded, too. His men wouldn't last long if they'd didn't receive reinforcements.

Andrew radioed his immediate superior, Brigadier General James Hargest, to request a New Zealand battalion be sent forward in a counter-attack. Hargest refused – the battalion was already fighting elsewhere. It wasn't long before the battalion announced it was ready to come to Andrew's aid, but Hargest ordered them to wait "unless position very serious".

MEANWHILE, ANDREW HIMSELF attempted a counter-attack, but failed. He lost contact with two of his companies and informed Hargest that in the current situation he would have to withdraw. "If you must, then you must," was the commander's reply.

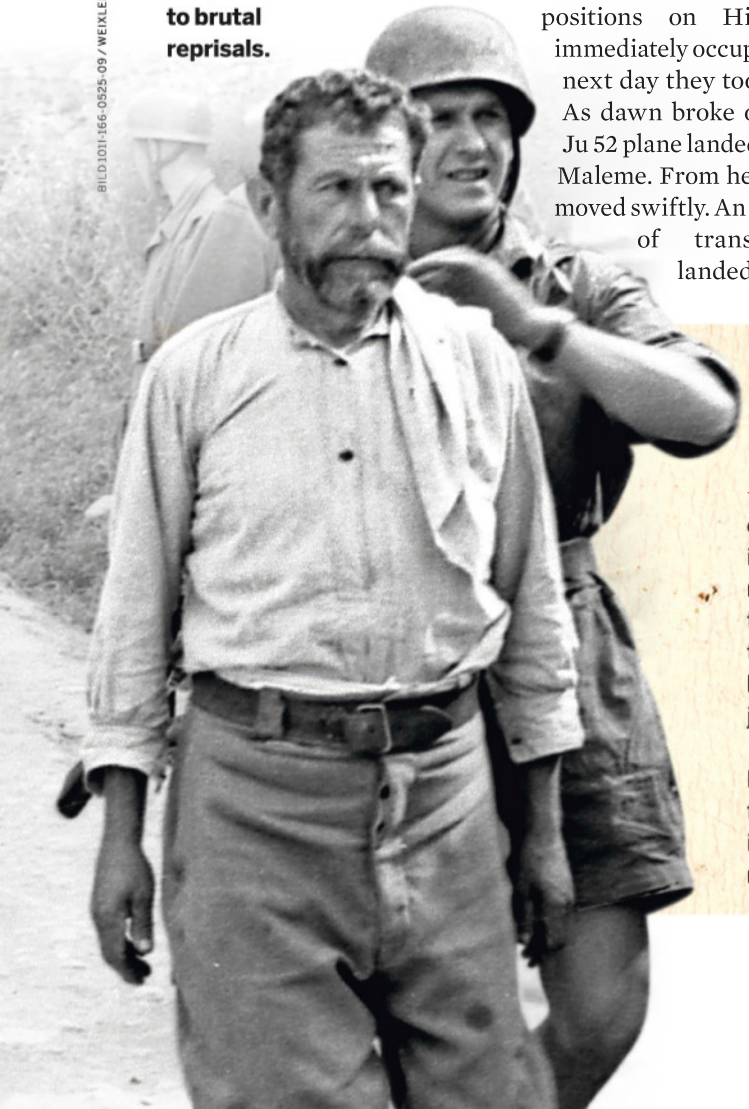
That decision would ultimately cost the British Crete. When the Germans discovered the New Zealanders had abandoned their positions on Hill 107, they immediately occupied it – and the next day they took the airfield. As dawn broke on 21st May, a Ju 52 plane landed unopposed at Maleme. From here, everything moved swiftly. An endless stream of transport planes landed and took off again, depositing reinforcements in the form of 14,000 *Gebirgsjäger* (elite mountain infantry). Major Witzig was still alive and flown to hospital in Athens. Despite huge losses, the paratroopers had managed to carry out the operation.

"FREYBERG WAS FORCED TO INFORM HIS SUBORDINATES THAT DEFEAT WAS INEVITABLE"

BY THE TIME the British realised the consequences of losing Maleme, it was too late. They tried to recapture the airfield, but they were far too few, and at a critical moment, the British fatefully hesitated – Major General Bernard Freyberg, commanding the Allied forces on Crete, was still convinced that the Germans' main attack would come from the sea. Therefore, he held back his reserves.

In fact, plans for a seaborne invasion had already been abandoned. Prior to the invasion, on 19th May, a battalion of Gebirgsjäger had been dispatched on troop ships from the Greek mainland but were discovered the following day by the Royal Navy. Only one transport vessel with 113 soldiers on board escaped – having learned their lesson, the Germans made no more attempts to ship soldiers to the island.

On Crete, the situation was completely different. On 27th May, following a relentless German advance eastwards, Freyberg was forced to inform his subordinates that defeat was inevitable and that an evacuation would have to begin. The British main force fought a rearguard action as it retreated



After the Germans occupied the island, the Cretans were subjected to brutal reprisals.

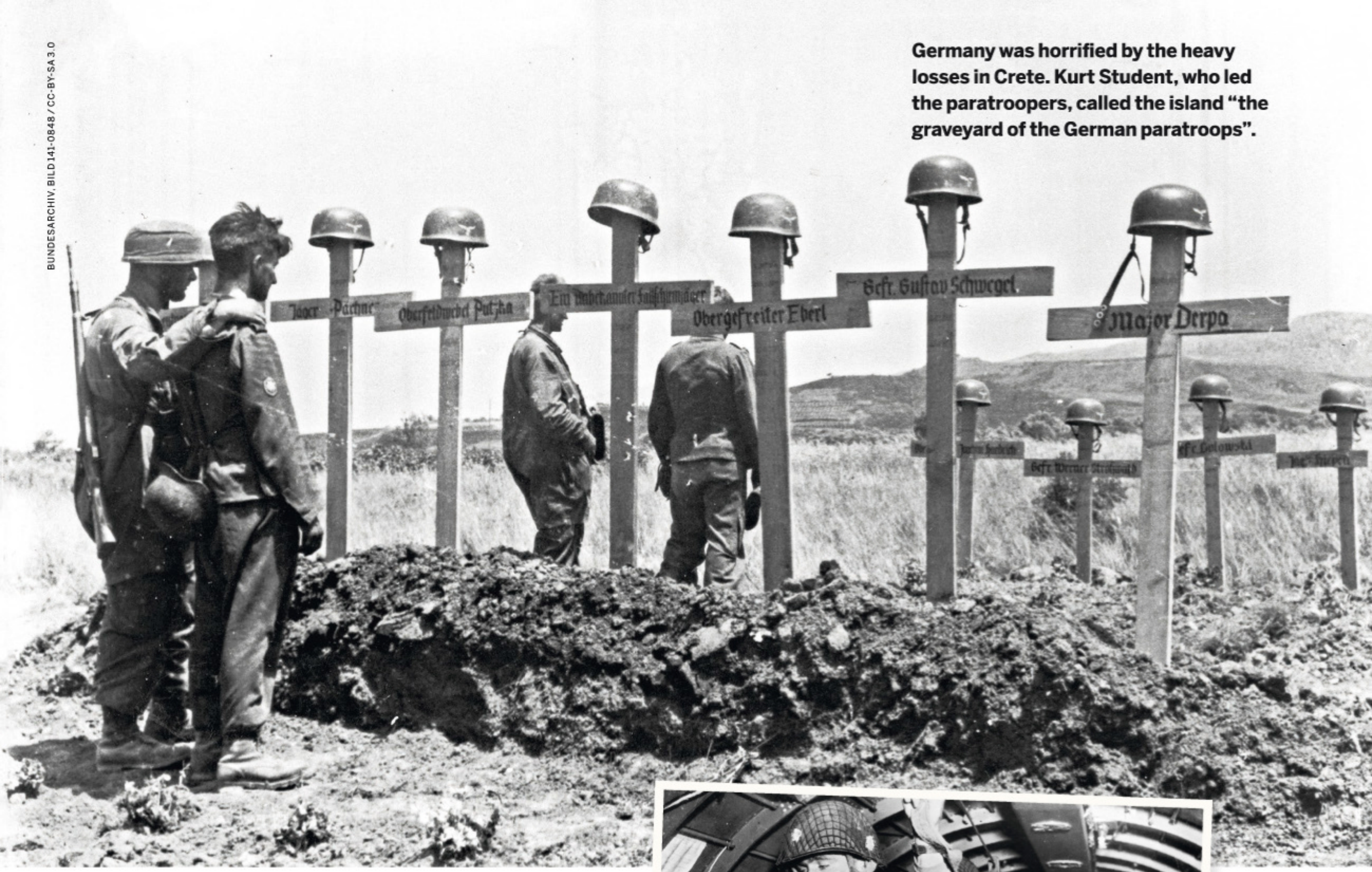
BILD 101I-166-0525-09 / WEIXLER, FRANZ PETER / CC-BY-SA 3.0

Germans took cruel revenge on civilians

★ Cretans had a thousand-year-old tradition of defending their island against intruders, and many armed civilians took part in the Allied counter-attacks. Prior to the invasion, the Germans believed that the Cretans would just give up and surrender.

They were completely wrong. Men, women and children all fought bravely to defend their island. A paratrooper was reported to have been killed with a hoe by a brave Cretan woman, who attacked when he landed right in front of her and tried to take off his parachute. And another entangled paratrooper was killed by an elderly man with a cane.

The shocked Germans never forgave the Cretans. According to a Greek account, the Germans killed 6,593 Cretan men, 1,113 women and 869 children during the occupation.



BUNDESARCHIV, BILD 141-0848 / CC-BY-SA 3.0

Germany was horrified by the heavy losses in Crete. Kurt Student, who led the paratroopers, called the island "the graveyard of the German paratroops".

to the southern and north-eastern coasts of Crete. On 29th May, the Royal Navy evacuated 4,000 men from Heraklion and a further 700 from Sfakia to North Africa. Over the following few days, the evacuation from Sfakia continued despite persistent German airstrikes. On the morning of 1st June, another 4,000 men were shipped from the island. They were the last.

Six hours later, the remaining Allied forces surrendered. Almost 12,000 Commonwealth and around 10,000 Greek troops became German prisoners of war; however, some managed to escape into the mountains of Crete.

Germany had won a great, but expensive, victory. No fewer than 3,352 German elite soldiers had lost their lives and more than 3,000 had been wounded. In particular, the paratroopers suffered catastrophic losses. When their commander, Major General Kurt Student, was asked about the invasion after the war, he replied: "For me … the Battle of Crete … carries bitter memories." ✪

Boris Koll and Nadia Claudi are freelance writers.

Further reading: Hitler's Paratrooper – The Life and Battles of Rudolf Witzig (2010) by Gilberto Villahermosa ★ **Airborne: WWII – Paratroopers in Combat** (2007) Julie Guard (ed.) ★ **Operation Mercury – The Fall of Crete 1941** (2007) by John Sadler.

THE LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION VIA GETTY IMAGES

Unlike the Germans, the Allies had parachutes that could be deployed manually during jumps.

Allies tweaked the idea

★ The idea of being able to drop large forces behind the enemy's lines was a tempting one for generals.

However, Hitler was so shocked by the Germans' huge casualties in Crete that he banned all future major airborne operations.

US and British forces reacted just the opposite. After all, the battle had demonstrated that large airborne landing operations were possible.

The British formed their first airborne division in late 1941 and in early 1942 the United States set up two divisions.

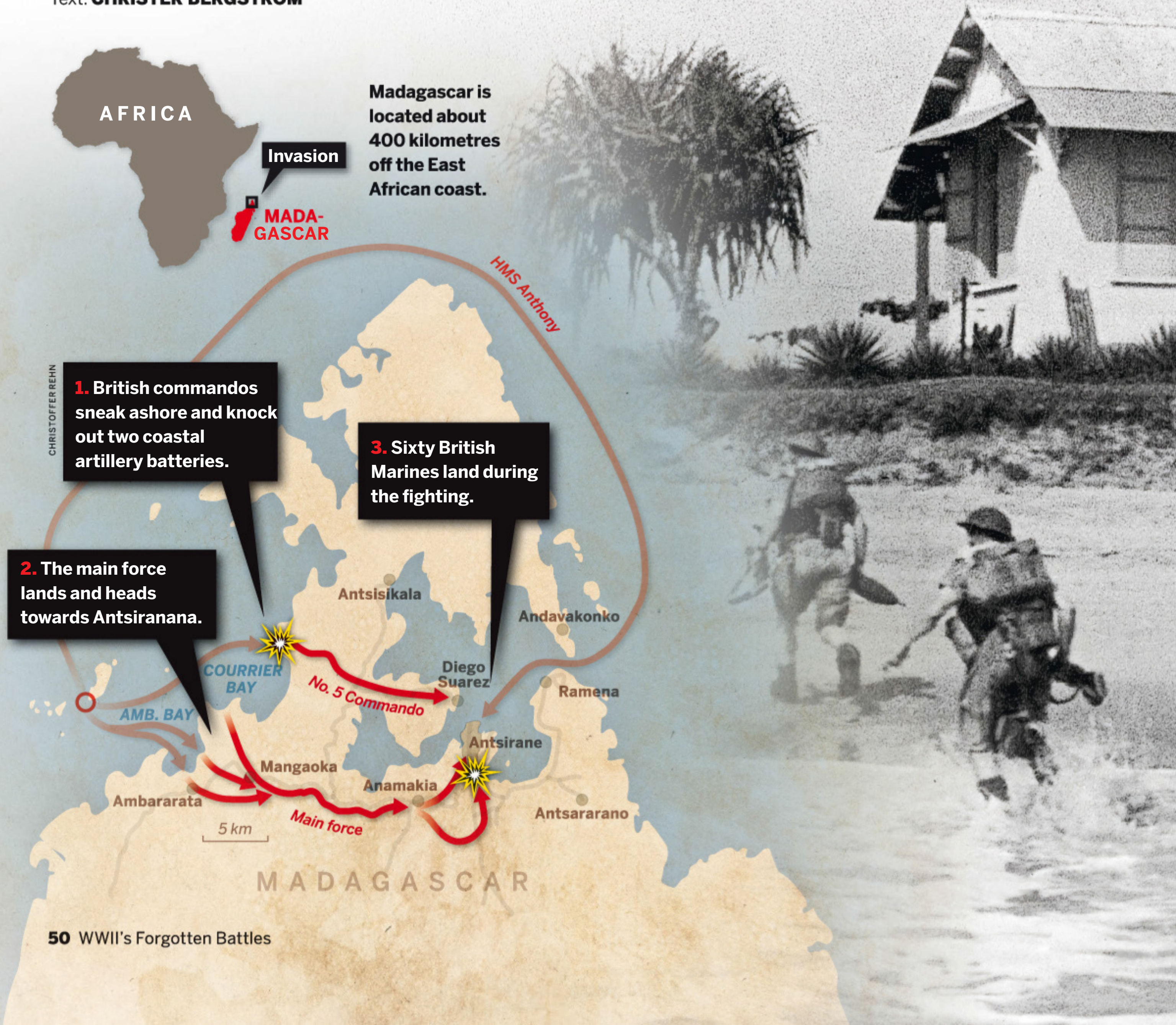
When the Allies crossed the Rhine in March 1945, 1,600 transport planes, 1,300 gliders and a force of 17,000 paratroopers paved the way for the final victory.

Madagascar 1942

BRITISH FOUGHT THE FRENCH

British forces invaded the French colony of Madagascar in 1942. An initial bloody battle was followed by many months of inching forward, during which control of the entire Indian Ocean lay in the balance.

Text: **CHRISTER BERGSTRÖM**



Madagascar is located about 400 kilometres off the East African coast.

1. British commandos sneak ashore and knock out two coastal artillery batteries.

2. The main force lands and heads towards Antsiranana.

3. Sixty British Marines land during the fighting.

CHRISTOFFER REHN

AFRICA
Invasion
MADAGASCAR
HMS Anthony
Antsisikala
Andavakonko
COURRIER BAY
AMB. BAY
No. 5 Commando
Diego Suarez
Ramena
Antsirane
Mangaoka
Anamakia
Ambararata
Antsararano
Main force
5 km
MADAGASCAR

During their advance, soldiers from the British 29th Infantry Brigade suddenly came under heavy fire and were forced to take cover. From some well-camouflaged bunkers and snipers, bullets shot out everywhere. The brigade commander, General Francis Festing, barely escaped with his life when his Universal Carrier (also known as a Bren Gun Carrier) was hit, but his driver lost his life.

The 11 tanks of the Royal Armoured Corps' B Company were called in. Under the command of Major Jocelyn Simon, five went into action. Their 40-mm guns thundered and their machine guns covered the opponent's positions. But both the difficult terrain and the enemy's guns prevented them from making a frontal attack.

Finding himself in a tricky situation, Simon ordered an evasive manoeuvre to the right, hoping to bypass the opponent's defensive positions by using a group of hills for protective cover. But on the other side of the high ground, the enemy had already guessed his intentions. By the time the British tanks had advanced, the enemy had responded by repositioning their 75-mm guns.

The Valentine and Mark VII Tetrarch tanks continued to rumble and screech their way across the rocky terrain.

No one on the British side spotted the enemy's new concealed positions until their guns opened fire. A shell struck Second Lieutenant Walker's Tetrarch tank and wounded the driver. Walker and ►

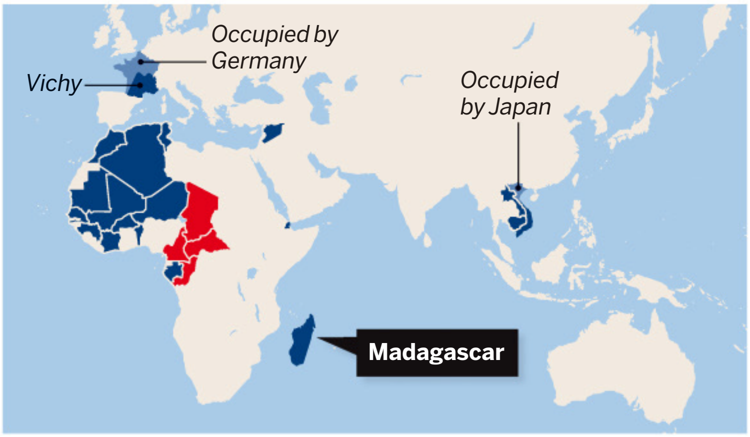
"TO BEGIN WITH, IT LOOKED AS THOUGH IT WOULD BE EASY"

MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ARMOR

The Universal Carrier was a British armoured vehicle with room for a Bren machine gun.

British soldiers land at Madagascar in May 1942. Operation Ironclad would prevent Vichy France and the Axis powers from using the island as a base for attacks in the area.

AP/RITZAU SCANPIX



CHRISTOFFER REHN

Map showing French colonies in Africa and Asia in September 1940.
🟦 Loyal to Vichy regime 🟥 Loyal to de Gaulle's Free France

HISTORIEARKIV

Colonial troops in Madagascar fire a French 75 field gun under the command of a French officer.

HISTORIEARKIV

Marshal Pétain led the French Vichy government 1940–44.

▶ his gunner jumped out, and found themselves in the middle of intense machine-gun fire.

Simon had command of the next tank. He shouted at his driver to try to drive off the road, but they were hindered by large boulders. The situation worsened when the front of Simon's tank was hit. A second shot shattered the gearbox and a third destroyed the turret mechanism. The crew jumped out. Simon and the gunner survived, but the driver ended up beneath the moving tank and was crushed under its tracks.

At that point, four of the five British tanks that had advanced were in flames. The remaining one retreated at full speed. Resigned to their fate, the surviving tank crews who had escaped their vehicles, including Major Simon, were captured by the enemy.

General Festing now ordered a new attack with B Company's last seven tanks. One of the soldiers, Sergeant Clegg, recalled: "As soon as we were clear of the pampas grass all hell descended on us."

One after another, the British tanks were hit and caught fire. Clegg saw the deputy company commander, Captain Palmer, jump out of his wrecked tank and run for cover, only to turn back to help one of his crew who'd fallen. The next moment, another shell hit the pair. Clegg recounted: "One moment they were there, as if held motionless, and in that terrible flash they were gone."

THE REMAINING TANKS managed to hold their positions for a while, manoeuvring back and forth, and shelling the enemy with their guns, but eventually they were forced to retreat. By that point, the Royal Armoured Corps' B Company had only five of its 11 tanks left, and was ordered to remain in defensive positions. But even there, they came across sporadic artillery fire that knocked out another Valentine. Thus, the British tank company was almost completely out of the game, with both commander and deputy lost in the space of an hour.

The scene sounds like something from the desert war in North Africa, which was at its height in 1942. But while the battle was indeed on African soil, it was thousands of kilometres from North Africa, on the large island of Madagascar, off the south-east coast of the African continent. The British troops' opponents here weren't Germans, but the French Army, which was loyal to the Vichy government. It was 5th May 1942, and the British invasion of French-ruled Madagascar had just begun.

THE BATTLE OF Madagascar – one of the least well-known battles of World War II – was the result of the complicated situation in France after its surrender in 1940, when the French prime minister, Philippe Pétain, made peace with Germany. As Paris was occupied by the Germans, the French government settled in the city of Vichy, and the "Vichy government" came into being.

Although the terms of the surrender imposed severe restrictions on the French, the Vichy government was allowed to retain a military force of 100,000 men, as well as the entire navy and air force. Technically, France was no longer at war, and Pétain focused on maintaining the authority of his government both in the southern half of the country that wasn't occupied by the Germans and in the French colonies.

But Britain and the Free French Forces – which, under General de Gaulle, continued their struggle against the Axis powers – worried that Pétain's navy and territories would fall into German hands. Less than two weeks after the French surrender, the British Royal Navy attacked the French fleet in the Algerian port of Mers-el-Kébir, sinking a battleship and damaging two others along with a destroyer.

“BETWEEN JULY AND NOVEMBER 1940, THE TWO FRENCH SIDES FOUGHT EACH OTHER IN WEST AFRICA”

The assault cost 1,297 French sailors their lives and created rage among the French. Thereafter, it was difficult for the British and the Free French Forces to try to take control of the French colonial empire.

ALTHOUGH CAMEROON AND most of French Equatorial Africa (Congo, Central Africa and Chad) sided with de Gaulle, the other French territories in Africa declared loyalty to the Vichy government. Between July and November 1940, the two French sides fought each other in West Africa, with varying results. In Dakar (Senegal), the Vichy side won, while the Free French Forces took over in Gabon.

The worst fighting took place in the Middle East, in Syria, which had been a French mandate since World War I. In May 1941, Admiral François Darlan, the Vichy government’s foreign minister, agreed to allow the Germans and Italians to use air bases in Syria. The following month, the battle for Syria was fought, as the Allies invaded Palestine in the south and Iraq in the east. Capturing Syria took more ►

Groundbreaking Tetrarch tank

IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM

The light tank had a top speed of 64 km/h.

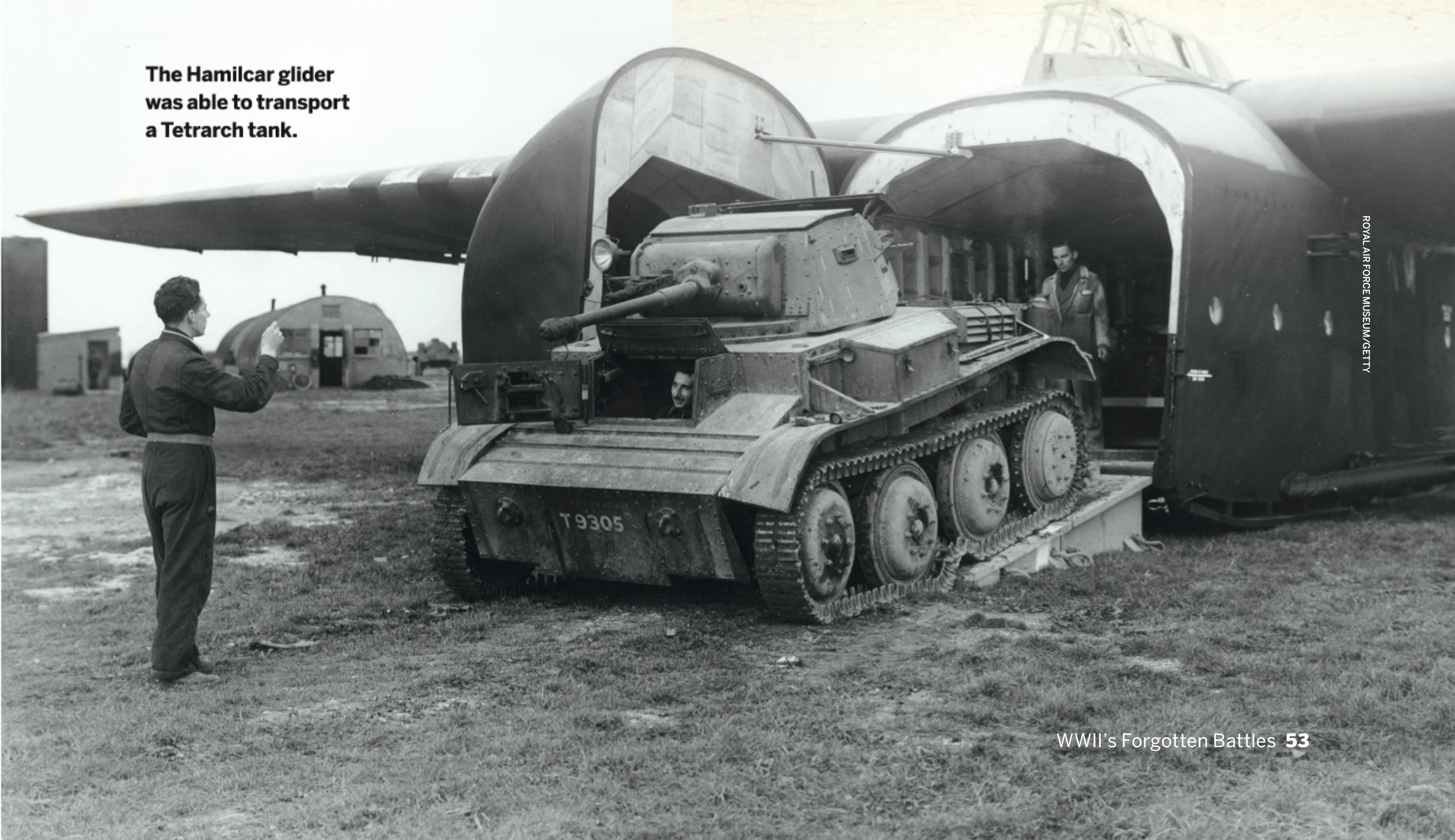
★ Only a few hundred Mark VII Tetrarch tanks were ever manufactured. The British used them in combat in just two campaigns, of which Madagascar was the first. Nevertheless, it played a vital role.

The Tetrarch was designed as a light reconnaissance tank. Its front armour – 16 mm – could not even protect against the lightest of German anti-tank weapons at a distance of 1,500 metres. But its strength lay in its speed: 64 kilometres per hour on the road. With its 40-mm main gun and 7.92-mm machine gun in the rotating turret, it was also excellent support in infantry combat.

After the Battle of Madagascar, the tanks were transferred to British airborne troops. During the invasion of Normandy in June 1944, they made history as the first tanks in the world to be landed for battle. The large Hamilcar glider had been specially designed to be able to carry a Tetrarch.

Sixteen Tetrarchs played an important role in support and reconnaissance operations for the British 6th Airborne Division. During the battle, they were used to guard important roads behind the front. Three tanks were lost.

At the end of August 1944, the unit was withdrawn to Britain and the Mark VII Tetrarch tank never entered a battlefield again.



The Hamilcar glider was able to transport a Tetrarch tank.

ROYAL AIR FORCE MUSEUM/GETTY

than a month of fierce fighting, during which the participating Allied forces suffered terrible losses. The experience caused the Allies to refrain from attacking Vichy French territories unless it was absolutely necessary.

OVER THE FOLLOWING months, there was a tense ceasefire in Africa between Vichy France and the Allies. This was of particular concern to Jan Smuts, prime minister of South Africa, who, in loyalty to Britain, declared war on Germany on 6th September 1939, and soon participated with numerous troops in North Africa. If the large Vichy-ruled island of Madagascar fell into the hands of the Axis powers, it would pose a direct threat to South Africa. But none of the Allies' military leaders wanted to attempt a risky venture like invading Madagascar in 1940.

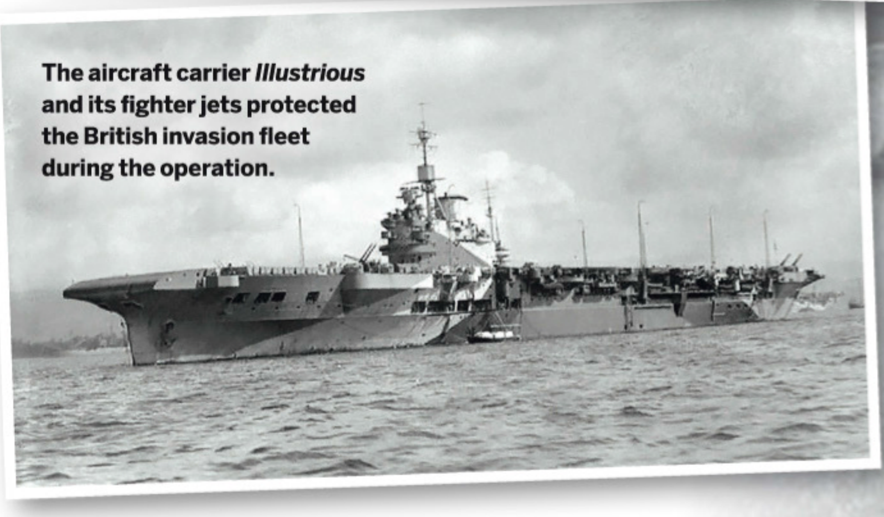
Invading and occupying the world's fourth largest island – larger than France by area – would undoubtedly require an incredible amount of resources from the already hard-pressed Allies.

BUT THE SITUATION worsened still further, forcing the Allies to rethink. In December 1941, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor and entered the war. One of Britain's worst defeats of World War II came when Singapore's large naval base fell into Japanese hands on 15th February 1942. Now the British feared that Japan's next step would be to enter the Indian Ocean in preparation for the invasion of British colonial India. They were right.

A glance at the map and an elementary knowledge of the ports in the Indian Ocean were enough for the Allies to realise what a catastrophe it would be if the Vichy government allowed the Axis powers to use the major port of Diego Suarez (present-day Antsiranana) on the east side of the northern tip of Madagascar, as it had with the air bases in Syria. If the Japanese and Germans were to start operating from there, the Allies' positions in the Indian Ocean would be seriously threatened.

An operation plan to invade Madagascar had already been drawn up as early as November 1941. According to this plan, which went by the code name Ironclad, it would be the largest British landing operation since the invasion of the Dardanelles (Gallipoli) during World War I. Unsurprisingly, the British prime minister, Churchill – who bore much of the responsibility for the failure of the

A Grumman F4F Wildcat (known as a Martlet Mk II in the British Navy) lands on *Indomitable*.



The aircraft carrier *Illustrious* and its fighter jets protected the British invasion fleet during the operation.

IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM (3)

Dardanelles in 1915 – was initially hesitant. But he soon changed his mind.

IT IS EASY to imagine the panic caused by an agent's report that was received just two days after Singapore's fall, stating that Japanese ships had been spotted in the port of Diego Suarez.

The decision to invade Madagascar was made quickly. The troops, Force 121, sailed from Britain on 23rd March 1942, setting a course for Durban in South Africa, from where the invasion would take place. The date of the landing was set for 5th May 1942. One British soldier, Ian Billingsley, recalled:

"The landing and occupation was scheduled for the night of 5th May 1942 at 02.00, which fortunately was a very calm sea and pitch black. There was no moon. The five unlit assault ships, leaving their protective Royal Navy screen, headed towards the coast proceeding slowly and on line ahead. Orders were given. 'Lower all assault crafts ... to within six feet of the waterline.'"

The British soldiers in No 5 Commando were some of the toughest in the entire British armed forces. With their faces painted black and their tommy guns ready, they quietly sneaked ashore at Courrier Bay on the west side of Madagascar. Efficiently and without attracting the attention of the main French force, they overpowered the two coastal artillery batteries and captured the bulk of the crew of 300 men. Thus, the most serious threat to British ships in the invasion fleet had been eliminated.

"WITH THEIR FACES PAINTED BLACK AND THEIR TOMMY GUNS READY, THEY QUIETLY SNEAKED ASHORE"

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Charles de Gaulle led the Free French Forces.

IN FACT, MADAGASCAR was defended by only a rather small French force of 8,000 men, with the support of 60–70 aircraft, but the commander, Governor-General Armand Léon Annet, was determined to resist if the Allies tried to invade. As soon became clear.

The Allied main force landed at Ambararata Bay on the west coast of Madagascar, opposite Diego ►

British ships on their way to Diego Suarez (present-day Antsiranana), after the French surrendered.

French troops march with Senegalese soldiers after surrendering at Diego Suarez, September 1942.

IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM

Suarez. The plan was to advance three miles to the east and then attack Diego Suarez from inland, where it was expected that the French defensive positions would be weakest. To begin with, it looked as though it would be easy. The British 29th Brigade quickly marched with 2,300 men towards the important port city, without encountering any resistance.

Meanwhile, planes from the British aircraft carriers *Illustrious* and *Indomitable* thundered past, high above their heads. Sea Hurricanes and Grumman Wildcat fighters took the French Arrachart air base at Antsirane by surprise and managed to strafe 23 aircraft while they were still on the ground. Swordfish torpedo biplanes headed for the port of Diego Suarez, where they succeeded in sinking an armed merchant ship and the submarine *Bévéziers*.

The Royal Navy deliberately targeted the latter in revenge for the French submarine's attack 18 months earlier that had seriously damaged the British battleship *Resolution*. Five of the attacking British planes were shot down in return.

The French lines of communication seemed to be malfunctioning. At least, that's what one French officer thought, who at 08.00 on 5th May, drove out of Fort Antsirane to find out why a post in the west wasn't answering the phone. Before the officer knew what had happened, he found himself in the middle of a group of soldiers from the 2nd Battalion of the Royal Welch Fusiliers. The British soldiers demanded that the French surrender and sent the shaken officer back to deliver the message to his commander.

"THE ASSAULT SUCCEEDED, AND SOON MOST OF THE PORT WAS IN BRITISH HANDS."

Badge of the British No 5 Commando.

THE FRENCH RESPONSE came in the form of artillery and machine-gun fire that halted the 29th Brigade and nearly wiped out B Company of the Royal Armoured Corps. It cost the British over 100 dead and wounded men. The fighting continued to rage all afternoon and into the evening, without the invaders making any progress. It was obvious that they needed to modify the plan. The following day, the British fighter HMS *Anthony* suddenly steered straight into the harbour of Diego Suarez. While the French defensive positions were bombarded by guns from the battleship HMS *Ramillies* and two cruisers, 60 marines landed from *Anthony* – right under the noses of the surprised French. The assault succeeded, and soon most of the port was in British hands.

At that point, the French garrison in Diego Suarez and Fort Antsirane realised that continued resistance was pointless, and hoisted a white flag. On 7th May, the surrender was signed.

THE OPERATION TO take over the rest of the huge island was not as bloody as the battle of Diego Suarez, but it was still costly. The advance progressed slowly over the rugged terrain, and French mines and destroyed bridges further delayed the British troops. The soldiers were also plagued by tropical diseases and violent downpours to which they were unaccustomed.

The capital Tananarive (present-day Antananarivo), in the middle of the island, wasn't captured until 28th September. The French commander, General Annet, received repeated demands to surrender, which he continued to reject as long as he still held areas that the Allies had not yet managed to capture. But in the long run, he didn't have a hope. On 31st October, a South African force captured Fianarantsoa in southern Madagascar, the last major city held by the French. It was not until 5th November – the day after the last French defences had fallen – that Annet agreed to lay down his arms.

The Battle of Madagascar cost no more than 107 dead and 280 wounded on the Allied side, but the time it took to complete the campaign showed how much resistance the Vichy French were still prepared to put up against the Allies. On the French side, 150 men died and 500 were wounded.

On 11th November 1942 – six days after General Annet's surrender – the French became aware of how fragile the government they had sought to defend was when the German Army entered and occupied the southern half of France, which according to the peace accord, should have remained under French rule.

Shortly afterwards, most of the soldiers captured in Madagascar enlisted in the Free French Forces under General de Gaulle's command. ✪

Christer Bergström is a military history writer and has written over 30 books about World War II.

Further reading: Operation Ironclad: The British Invasion of Madagascar – 1942 (2015) by Cliff Lloyd

AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

The Japanese midget submarines had two men in each vessel. Here the crews pose before the mission.

Japanese Navy fought for Vichy France

★ During the Battle of Madagascar, the British Royal Navy intercepted French radio signals requesting support from the Japanese Navy. In fact, the Japanese 8th Submarine Squadron, led by Rear Admiral Ishizaki, was operating in Madagascar's waters at the time. Each of the flotilla's five submarines was equipped with a two-man midget submarine; in addition, two of the submarines had reconnaissance aircraft.

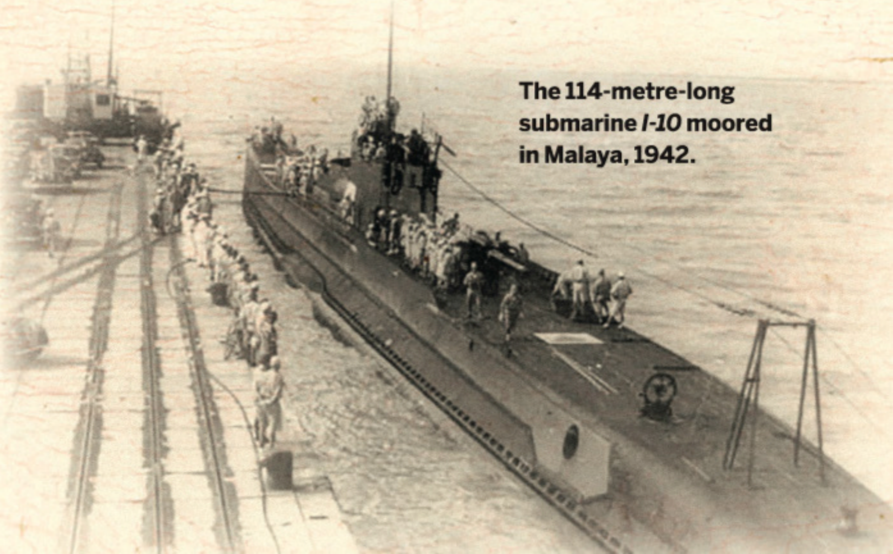
ON THE NIGHT of 30th May, the plane from submarine *I-10* flew over Diego Suarez to find some suitable targets for the midget submarines.

The following night, two of the Japanese midget submarines, from *I-16* and *I-20*, crept into the harbour. Lieutenant Saburo Akieda managed to manoeuvre one of the small vessels into the perfect position to fire upon the large battleship *Ramillies*. Akieda had two torpedoes. The first he fired towards *Ramillies* at 20.25. The violent explosion told him it had hit.

AKIEDA COOLLY BIDED his time until, an hour later, he was in the perfect position to attack the British tanker *Loyalty*. A single torpedo was enough to destroy the vessel.

However, the Japanese midget submarine ran aground on a reef and was destroyed, but Akieda and his crew mate were able to escape unseen on land, where they were tracked down and killed by Royal Marines two days later.

The British battleship was so badly damaged that it had to be towed to Durban for repair.


The 114-metre-long submarine *I-10* moored in Malaya, 1942.

Thousands were killed in the raid on Dieppe. The Germans opened fire on the unprotected soldiers, who died in the water or on their way across the beach.

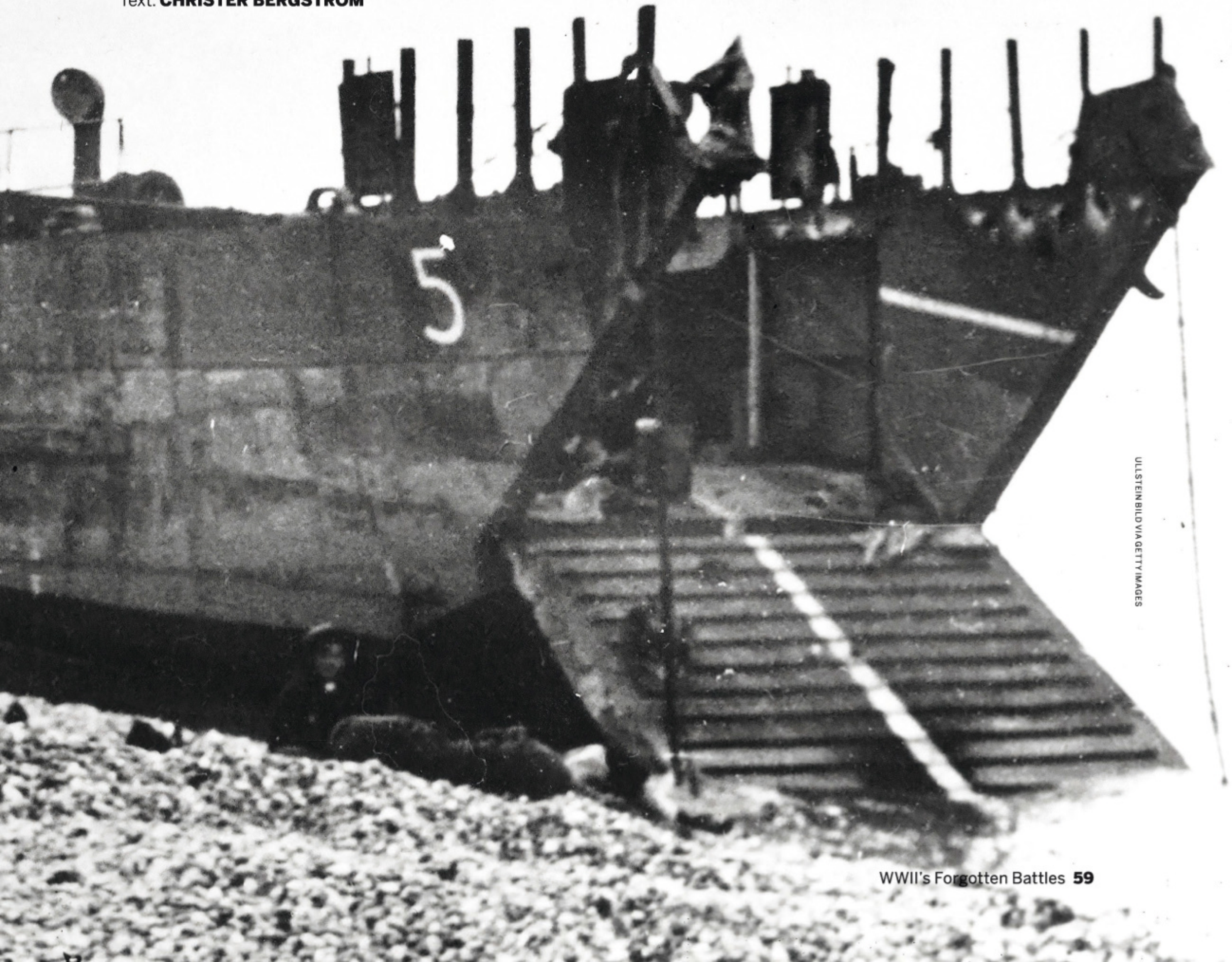
Dieppe 1942

A LANDING TO PLEASE STALIN

To keep Stalin on side, the Allies launched a raid on the German-occupied French port of Dieppe in August 1942. The appalling disaster that followed has never been fully investigated.

Text: **CHRISTER BERGSTRÖM**

UNITED KINGDOM
London
Dieppe
Paris
FRANCE



ULLSTEIN BILD VIA GETTY IMAGES

> **“THE CANADIAN SOLDIERS RUSHED DESPERATELY FORWARD, STRAIGHT INTO A HAIL OF BULLETS”**

Just before sunrise – at 05.07 – the first landing craft hit the pebbled shore of the northern French port of Dieppe. It was 19th August 1942, and France had been occupied by Germany for more than two years. Now the Allies were about to make their first major landing in Europe since Dunkirk.

The Germans had just 60 soldiers on the beach, under the command of Lieutenant Willi Weber, most of whom were well protected in four concrete bunkers – one of which was disguised as a holiday home – at the eastern end of the seafront. Others lay in their positions on the crest of the steep heights above the promenade.

As the ramps of the landing craft were lowered, the Germans opened fire with both machine guns and grenade launchers. Major George Schofield, the leader of the first wave of attacks, was the first to set foot on the ramp. A second later a series of bullets ripped into his body.

The Canadian soldiers rushed desperately forward, straight into a hail of bullets. Many collapsed. Others leaped over the piles of their dead and wounded comrades, running blindly towards the shore. It was a terrible massacre. Of the 250 men in the first wave, only a handful managed to cross the 50-metre-wide beach and scramble to the sea wall, which offered some protection against the bullets. They sheltered there, some besides themselves with terror, while others were just stunned by the unreal bloodbath they had witnessed. When they looked back, they saw piles of dead and wounded men, blood and torn body parts.

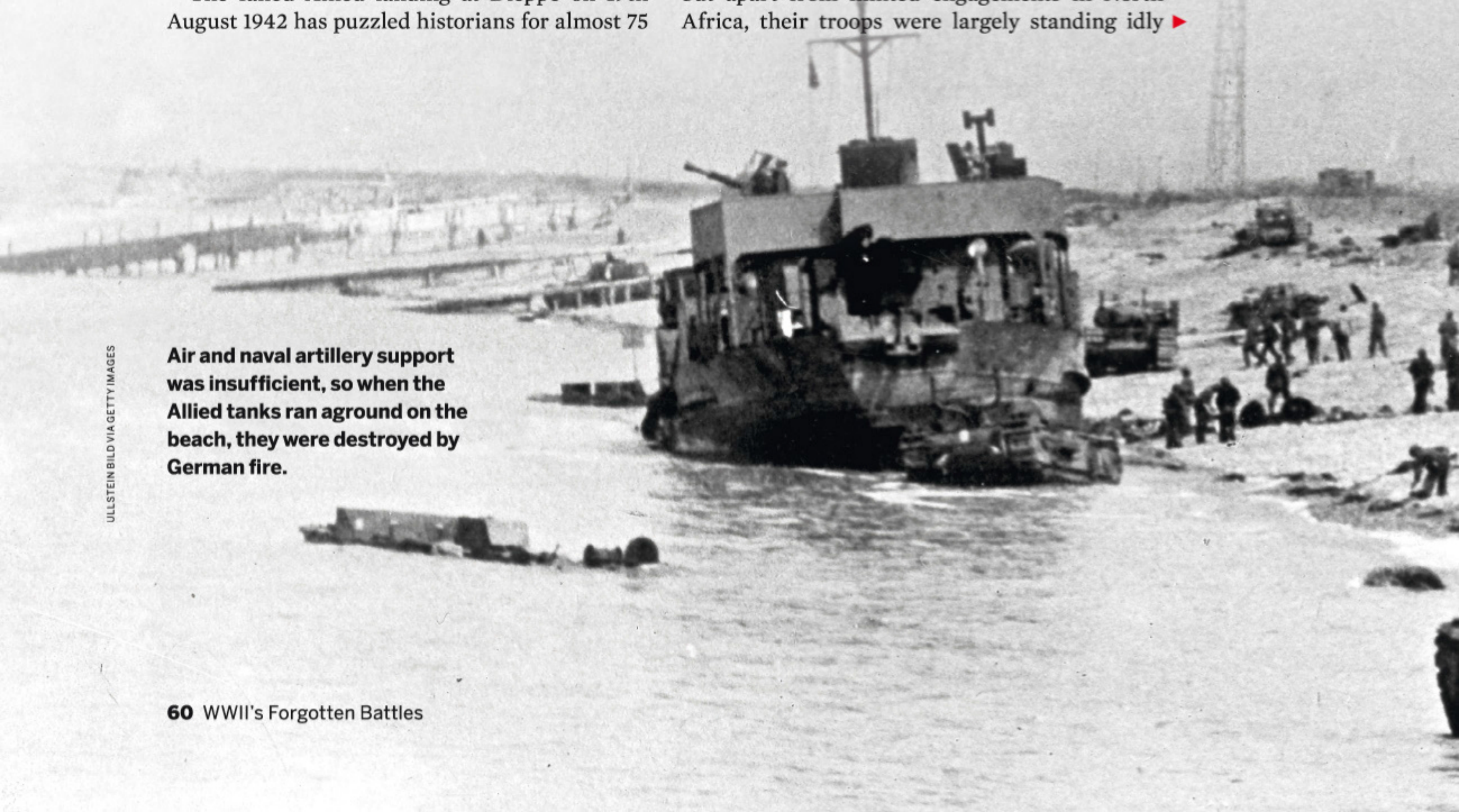
The failed Allied landing at Dieppe on 19th August 1942 has puzzled historians for almost 75 years. In fact, the real reason for this operation has never been clarified. Capturing and destroying Dieppe’s relatively small port and then withdrawing had hardly any discernible military benefit. And the argument that the operation was carried out to test the strength of the German coastal defences doesn’t hold up either.

It is not even clear who gave the go-ahead for the operation, but by 15th August 1942, Winston Churchill, Britain’s prime minister, was telegraphing his chief of staff, General Hastings Ismay, to press for the operation’s launch.

Winston Churchill promised Joseph Stalin he would invade France.

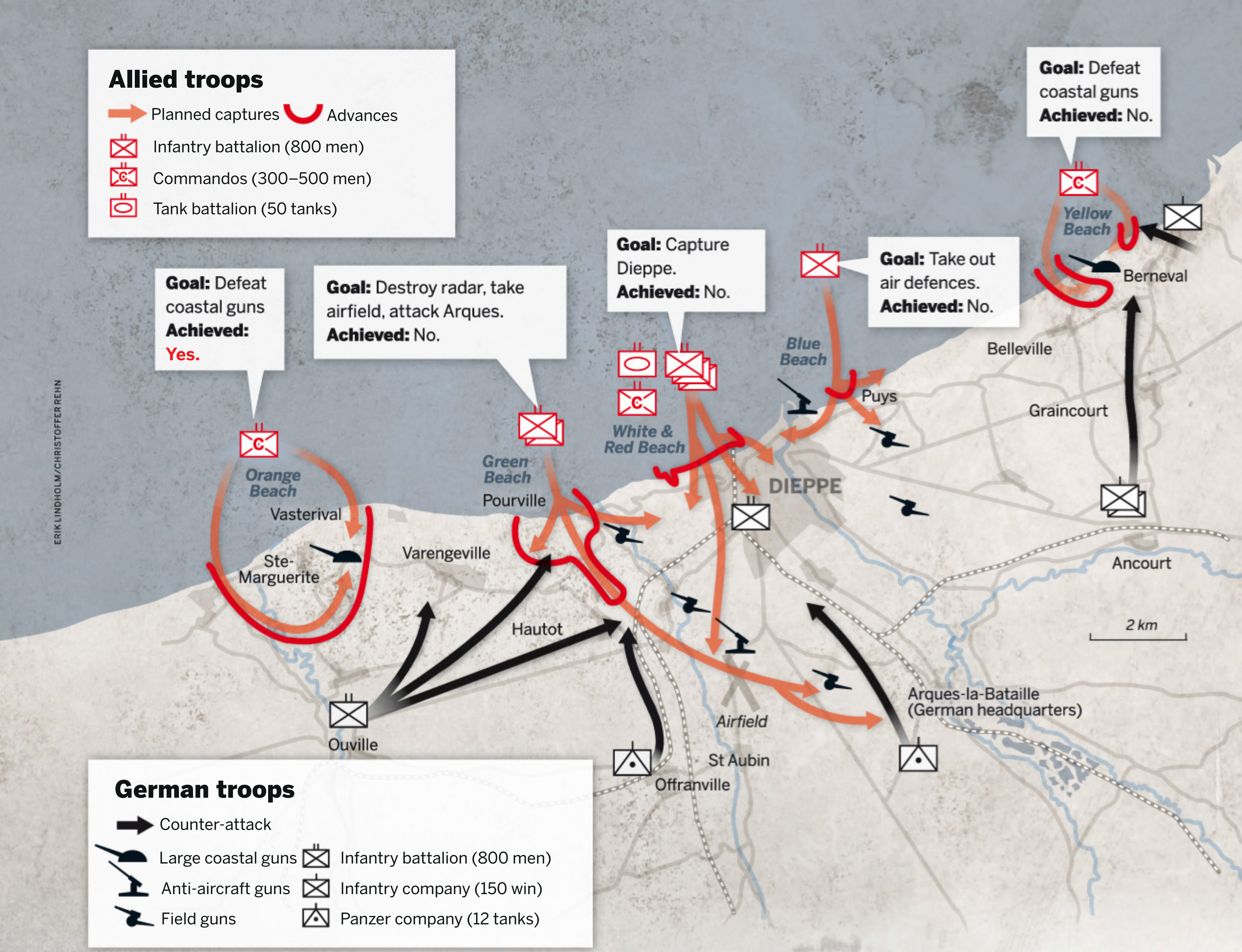
THREE DAYS EARLIER, Churchill had been called to account in a meeting with the Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin. The 67-year-old prime minister had just arrived in the Kremlin after arriving by plane in Moscow a few hours earlier. He was quickly ushered in to meet with Stalin, who was outraged that the Red Army had been fighting the war for more than a year without significant support from his Western allies.

Sure, Britain and the US had delivered some munitions and raw materials to the Soviet Union, but apart from limited engagements in North Africa, their troops were largely standing idly ►



Air and naval artillery support was insufficient, so when the Allied tanks ran aground on the beach, they were destroyed by German fire.

ULLSTEIN BILD VIA GETTY IMAGES


Allied troops
Planned captures
Advances
Infantry battalion (800 men)
Commandos (300–500 men)
Tank battalion (50 tanks)
Goal: Defeat coastal guns Achieved: Yes.
Goal: Destroy radar, take airfield, attack Arques. Achieved: No.
Goal: Capture Dieppe. Achieved: No.
Goal: Take out air defences. Achieved: No.
Goal: Defeat coastal guns Achieved: No.
Orange Beach
Vasterival
Ste-Marguerite
Varengeville
Green Beach
Pourville
Hautot
Ouville
White & Red Beach
DIEPPE
Blue Beach
Puys
Yellow Beach
Berneval
Belleville
Graincourt
Ancourt
Airfield
St Aubin
Offranville
Arques-la-Bataille (German headquarters)
2 km
German troops
Counter-attack
Large coastal guns
Anti-aircraft guns
Field guns
Infantry battalion (800 men)
Infantry company (150 win)
Panzer company (12 tanks)

ERIK LINDHOLM/CHRISTOFFER REHN

Ian Fleming (1908–64) did not see combat during World War II.

007's creator helped in planning

★ Previously classified British documents show that Ian Fleming, who later wrote the famous James Bond books, was involved in the planning of the Dieppe raids. Fleming, who at the time was a high-ranking British intelligence officer, deployed a small commando force to try to steal a German encryption device while the Germans were busy fighting the Canadian division. However, this mission also ended in failure.

▶ by with empty rifles in the British Isles, with the English Channel between them and the Germans.

Stalin reminded Churchill that he had promised to open a second front – by means of a landing in France – in the spring of 1942, but it was still the Soviet Union that was sacrificing most of the blood in the fight against their common enemy.

In the euphoric mood that had followed the Soviet forces chasing the Germans west, away from Moscow in December 1941, the Allied leadership had hurriedly made grandiose plans for a landing in France. But the British prime minister knew that their enthusiasm had quickly waned when the Germans took back the initiative in spring 1942.

IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM

Louis Mountbatten (1900–79) was responsible for the raid on Dieppe.

NOW CHURCHILL HAD a difficult task: he had to tell Stalin that the Allies had no intention of opening a second front in Europe before the following year at the earliest, but without upsetting his wartime partner. Having stated that he wished to "speak frankly" and inviting Stalin to do likewise, he reminded the Soviet leader that the discussions about creating a diversion in France that would draw German forces away from the Eastern Front had never been firmly promised for 1942, and that the US and Britain had since deliberated and realised that a landing in Europe was out of the question in September, the only month left that year when the weather could be relied upon, but that preparations were underway for a big operation in 1943.

Stalin grew glum, badgering the British PM to tell him why an invasion at Pas de Calais couldn't be done sooner. Churchill stuck to his guns, pointing out that while it was possible to land a handful of divisions, they would lack air support and the invasion would surely fail. Stalin's mood grew darker. Churchill decided that having delivered the bad news, it was time to deliver the good. He explained that the Western Allies had decided to carry out an invasion of the French colonies of Morocco and Algeria as a preface to opening a new front in Southern Europe. And then there was Operation Torch, the code name for the proposed Allied landing at Dieppe. It wasn't a full invasion, but it was a landing in France.

Churchill drew a crocodile and explained to Stalin how the Western Allies intended to attack the beast's soft belly at the same time as rapping it on its snout. Stalin was convinced: "May God prosper this undertaking," he said with a gleam in his eye.

LOUIS MOUNTBATTEN, COMMANDER of the Allies' combined operations, had planned the commando raid on the German-occupied French port city of Saint-Nazaire in May 1942, where 600 elite soldiers had succeeded in surprising the defenders and wreaking havoc at the port facilities.

But the plan Mountbatten made for Dieppe was different: now an entire division would be deployed in a landing operation to capture and destroy a port before withdrawing back to Britain. But while Saint-Nazaire had strategic value as a German U-boat base, Dieppe was of questionable military worth.

Although he lacked the approval of the chiefs of staff, Mountbatten continued to work on the plan, which was now called Operation Jubilee. With Churchill's blessing, the landing fleet and the 2nd Canadian Division were put on standby.

What followed was nothing short of a tragedy. On the night of 19th August 1942, the invasion fleet set out. Halfway across the English Channel, the ships ran into a German coastal convoy. The

BUNDESARCHIV, BILD 101I-291-1213-34 / MÜLLER, KARL

German defenders look out over the beach at Dieppe with their MG 34 machine gun equipped with a fixed, swivel mount.

element of surprise was lost. The Germans were well prepared when the boats steered towards land and discharged their loads on to the beach.

"SOLDIERS PEEKED OVER THE EDGE OF THE CRAFT, THEN SHRANK BACK AS THEY SAW THE HELLISH SCENE"

NOW THE MASSACRE was in full swing, the soldiers from the first attack wave were huddled by the sea wall, when the second wave's landing craft arrived. The incoming soldiers peeked over the edge of the craft, then shrank back as they saw the hellish scene they were being led towards. Many shouted in protest, but it didn't help. The ramps came down and German bullets struck the tightly packed men with muffled blows. Men shouted as they slipped on the blood at the bottom of the craft and stumbled over bodies. The officers drew their pistols and, aiming them at their own men, forced the troops out of the craft and on to the shore.

They were driven straight into hell.

The Canadian journalist Ross Munro wrote afterwards: "On no other front have I witnessed such a carnage. It was brutal and terrible and shocked you almost to insensibility to see the piles of dead and feel the hopelessness on the attack at this point."

Once the Germans could see nothing but immobile bodies filling the beach, they stopped firing. A moment of calm ensued when all that was heard down on the beach was the wailing of the wounded, along with sobbing and prayers from the terrified soldiers sheltering on the beach.

Then the Germans started shouting at the Canadians, encouraging them to surrender. The landed soldiers began to mumble and move. Then the first ones stood up with their hands above their heads. When nothing happened to them, more movement followed across the beach. The entire surviving landing force surrendered.

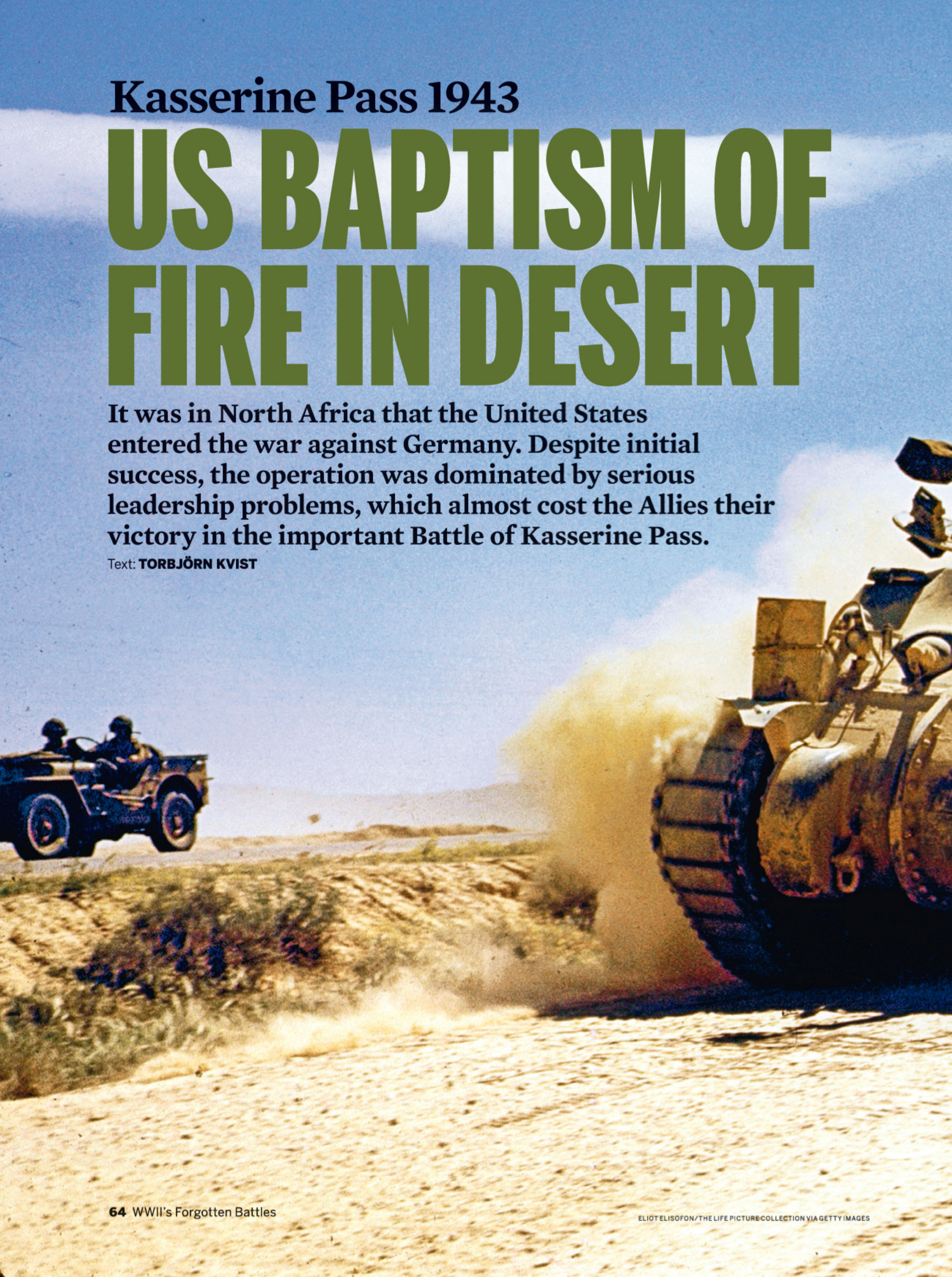
Of the 5,000 men who participated, 1,500 managed to get back to the landing craft and were evacuated. The rest remained – dead, dying or captured. The Western Allies subsequently tried to hush up the incident to preserve their nations' fighting spirit . But at the same time, they needed to show Stalin that they had made a real effort in Dieppe. Goebbels's propaganda ministry in Germany did them a favour by dismissing the whole thing as a failed invasion attempt. By all accounts, Stalin was finally convinced that a second front in Europe was impossible, as Churchill had said. After his agents provided further information about the débâcle at Dieppe, he sent a telegram to Churchill on 8th September 1942. It said, "I wish you success in the operation against Rommel in Egypt."

Christer Bergström is a military writer.

Further reading:
Gauntlet to Overlord (1972) by Ross Munro
★ **Tragedy at Dieppe – Operation Jubilee** (2014) by Mark Zuehlke.

Canadian and British soldiers in German captivity after the failed operation.

ULLSTEIN/GETTY



Kasserine Pass 1943

US BAPTISM OF FIRE IN DESERT

It was in North Africa that the United States entered the war against Germany. Despite initial success, the operation was dominated by serious leadership problems, which almost cost the Allies their victory in the important Battle of Kasserine Pass.

Text: **TORBJÖRN KVIST**

ELIOT ELISOFON/THE LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION VIA GETTY IMAGES

“KENNETH ANDERSON REGARDED FREDENDALL AS INCOMPETENT FROM THE OUTSET”

A United States Sherman tank outside Sened in Tunisia in 1943. The battles that occurred after landing in North Africa were the US Army’s first encounter with German panzer divisions.

During the spring and summer of 1942, Britain persuaded the US to abandon the idea of a direct invasion of the European mainland. Instead of Operation Sledgehammer – landing in northern France – the Americans agreed to what was seen as a detour: Operation Torch, landing in Morocco and Algeria to open a second front in North Africa. The aim was to destroy the German Afrika Korps and gather strength for the move into Europe.

Operation Torch began on 8th November 1942, just days after the British victory at El Alamein over 3,000 kilometres to the east. The landing marked the introduction of the mighty US military to the war against Germany, and the first step in its campaign towards Berlin. Torch was mainly a US operation; from Casablanca in the west to Algiers in the east, it was only later on that British forces participated. Algeria and Morocco – French colonies under the pro-German Vichy regime – put up only sporadic resistance, and Allied troops were able to advance relatively easily through the Atlas Mountains into Tunisia. At the end of January, the German and Italian Afrika Korps gathered in the eastern part of Tunisia, sandwiched between US troops from Operation Torch in the west and General Montgomery's British Eighth Army from El Alamein in the south. With a two-front war imminent, the Atlas Mountains came under the spotlight. Forming a natural defence around Tunisia, the inferior German and Italian troops now had something resembling a fortress to which they could turn.

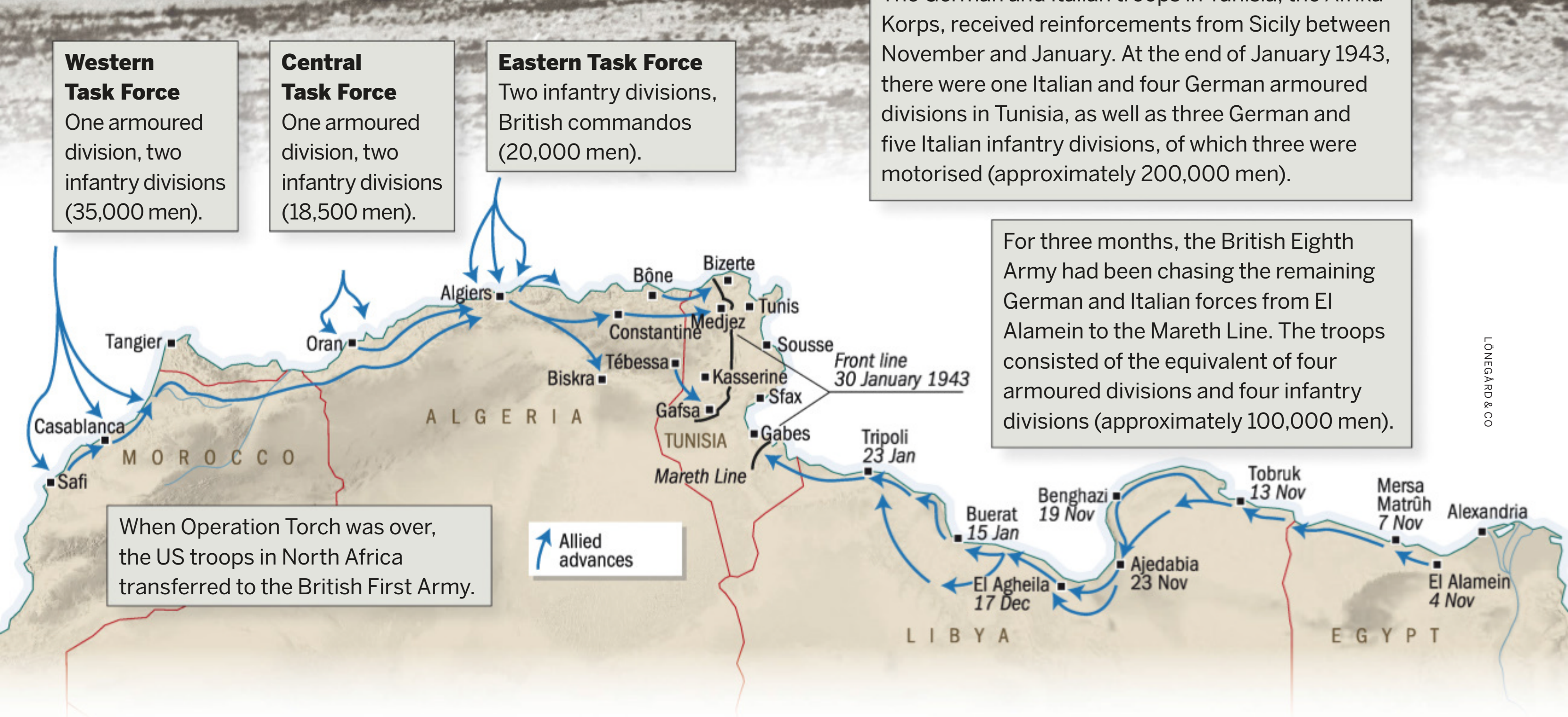
However, the Germans were concerned. The Allies had already taken a prominent position at the foot of the Aures Mountains near the village of Faid, in central Tunisia. Field Marshal Kesselring requested a strategy from Rommel to repel the Allied forces in the west, back through the three-kilometre-wide Kasserine Pass.

II CORPS WAS the first combatant US Army unit in the Afro-European region. It had formed the Central Task Force in Oran during Operation Torch, but was now part of the British First Army, which was assembled in northern Algeria together with two British and one French army corps. The US corps was poorly organised during the

US M3 tanks advance through the desert. The Vichy French troops encountered in western North Africa put up no major resistance after the invasion.

ELIOT ELISOFON/THE LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION VIA GETTY IMAGES

Operation Torch, 8th–16th November 1942



Western Task Force
One armoured division, two infantry divisions (35,000 men).

Central Task Force
One armoured division, two infantry divisions (18,500 men).

Eastern Task Force
Two infantry divisions, British commandos (20,000 men).

The German and Italian troops in Tunisia, the Afrika Korps, received reinforcements from Sicily between November and January. At the end of January 1943, there were one Italian and four German armoured divisions in Tunisia, as well as three German and five Italian infantry divisions, of which three were motorised (approximately 200,000 men).

For three months, the British Eighth Army had been chasing the remaining German and Italian forces from El Alamein to the Mareth Line. The troops consisted of the equivalent of four armoured divisions and four infantry divisions (approximately 100,000 men).

When Operation Torch was over, the US troops in North Africa transferred to the British First Army.

LONEGARD & CO

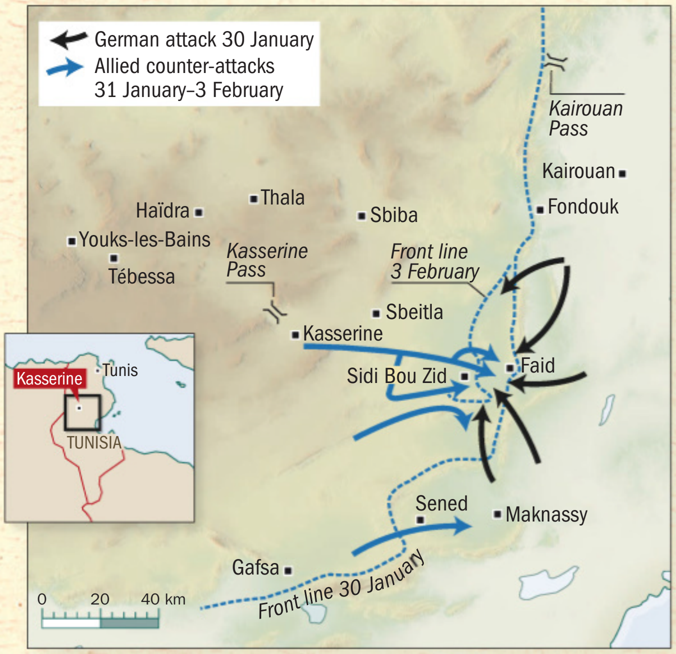
> **“IN THE MIDDLE OF THE INSPECTION, THE GERMANS LAUNCHED A RENEWED ATTACK”**

last days of January 1943 and spread all over the place. It consisted of the 1st Infantry Division (known as the Big Red One) and the 9th Infantry Division, as well as the 1st Armored Division. Its commander was Major General Lloyd Fredendall, a career officer from Wyoming, who was dismissed from West Point twice and instead received his commission through reserve officer training at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). He was a short, energetic man, who put on a tough persona to the outside world.

Perhaps it was his cockiness that appealed to the US Army chief of staff, General George Marshall, when he gave Fredendall command of the Central Task Force, and then his first battle command, II Corps. His immediate superior, British Lieutenant-General Kenneth Anderson, regarded him as incompetent from the outset. Fredendall lacked any combat experience and despite appearances, preferred to stay at sea on his staff ship during Operation Torch. Once ashore, he had a large command bunker built 15 kilometres outside the city of Tébessa in Algeria, almost 100 kilometres behind an imaginary front line on the other side of the Kasserine Pass.

IT WAS THE Germans who took the initiative. The fighting began on 30th January, when units from the 21st Panzer Division of the German 5th Panzer Army under Colonel-General Hans-Jürgen von Arnim advanced on the Allied positions at Faid. They immediately met fierce resistance from the well-aimed crossfire of US and French artillery. The Germans suffered many losses and retreated to their starting position. Major General Orlando Ward, head of the US 1st Armored Division, commanded an advance aimed at attacking the fleeing German units. However, General Ward failed to consult with the more experienced British about German panzer tactics. Soon the US tanks were surrounded by the dreaded German 88-mm anti-tank guns. Every tank was hit and the Germans were able to attack once again. The US infantry were unable to escape and their use of weapons seemed almost amateur. The German tank crews were easily able to overcome the hapless US troops.

At the turn of the month, January-February 1943, the Germans had recaptured virtually all of Tunisia ►



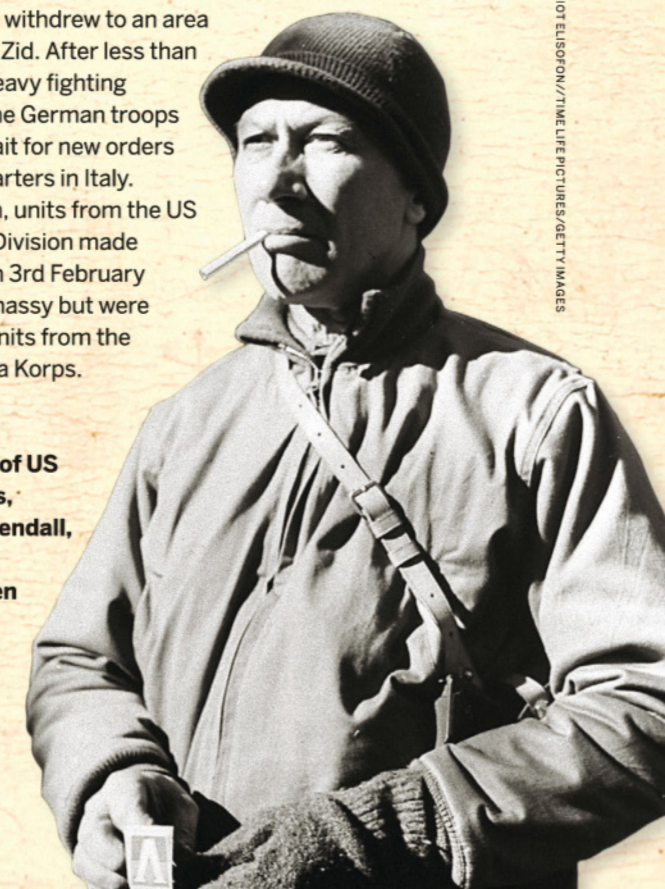
LÖNEGARD & CO

The battles at Faid

★ After Operation Torch and the Allied advances, US units held a front along the south-eastern edge of the Atlas Mountains. However, the passes at Maknassy, Fondouk and Kairouan, which faced the Tunisian plains and the coast, were still in German hands.

On 30th January, German units from the 21st Panzer Division attacked the US forces holding the Faid Pass. It was important for the Germans to regain this, as a US attack east of the coast threatened to cut off Rommel's forces in southern Tunisia. After several days of unsuccessful counter-attacks by its 1st Armored Division, the US decided to retreat and withdrew to an area near Sidi Bou Zid. After less than a week, the heavy fighting ceased and the German troops stopped to wait for new orders from headquarters in Italy.

In the south, units from the US 1st Armored Division made an attempt on 3rd February to reach Maknassy but were repulsed by units from the German Afrika Korps.



Commander of US Army II Corps, General Fredendall, was quickly replaced when the fighting at Kasserine Pass began.

ELIOT ELISOFON//TIME LIFE PICTURES/GETTY IMAGES

and effectively closed the mouth of the Kasserine Pass at Faid. Rommel then ordered a halt and began a two-week discussion with his subordinates about what to do next. It was a tense situation – they were between two enemy armies and the outcome was uncertain. One thing Rommel had learned, however, was that the US Army posed a smaller threat than anticipated. He was sure of that.

LITTLE WAS DONE to improve the situation. Communications had broken down, and General Fredendall sat in his bunker 100 kilometres away, not even bothering to visit the shocked troops in the Tunisian mountains. He also had a careless way of expressing himself, even during battle. Instead of sticking to standard commands, he spoke in slang and confusing codes that couldn't be understood by either his staff or the troops.

Fredendall and the head of the 1st Armored Division, General Ward, had already developed a deep mutual resentment, and now they refused to even talk to each other. But his superior, Lieutenant-General Anderson, was also part of the problem. His troops, scattered along a 320-kilometre-long front on the northern side of the Atlas Mountains, had not trained together, and language and procedural differences were a constant issue. Anderson had ignored the varying combat strengths of his men – the British were experienced but there were too few of them, the Americans were well equipped but inexperienced, and the French were a poorly equipped colonial force. There was also a lack of credible air defence. With Malta as virtually their only available air base, the Allies found it difficult to act on a tactical level and the Luftwaffe was able to temporarily gain air supremacy over Tunisia with numerically inferior air forces.

ON 14TH FEBRUARY, the US 1st Armored Division and the Big Red One Infantry were still in disarray, grouped at Sidi Bou Zid, 16 kilometres west of Faid, on a plateau inside the mouth of the Kasserine Pass. There they were attacked by units from the German 10th and 21st Panzer Divisions, both borrowed from von Arnim's 5th Panzer Army, and under the command of the Desert Fox, Field Marshal Rommel, himself.

The US troops never managed to organise themselves for the battle. Their infantry was grouped at three different levels without the ability to support each other and lacking help from either tanks or artillery. The Germans had no problem sweeping aside the resistance and the US withdrew into the pass after the first day.

It was a disaster – II Corps had so far lost 2,500 men, wounded or dead, over 100 tanks and almost

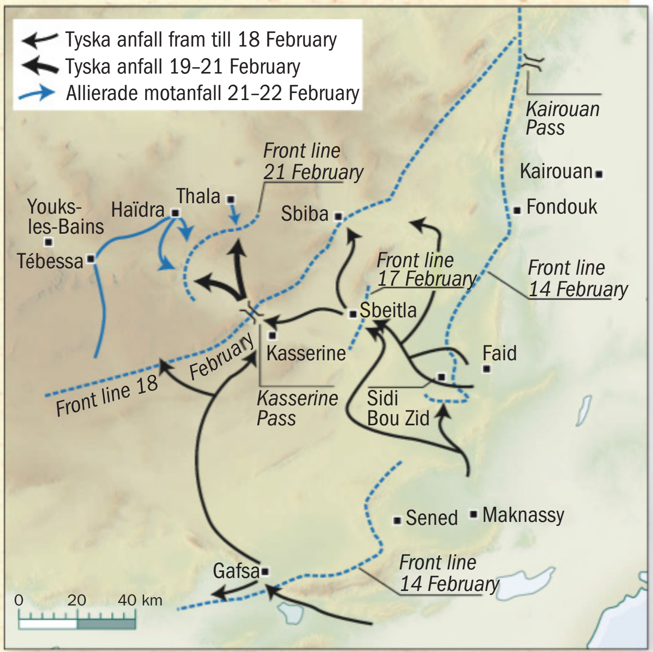
German Panzer IV (closest) and Panzer III during an attack in the desert. The newly arrived US units weren't prepared for the German attack, which resulted in a chaotic retreat towards the Kasserine Pass.

SCHERL/SUEDDEUTSCHE ZEITUNG PHOTO/RITZAU SCANPIX

Kasserine Pass

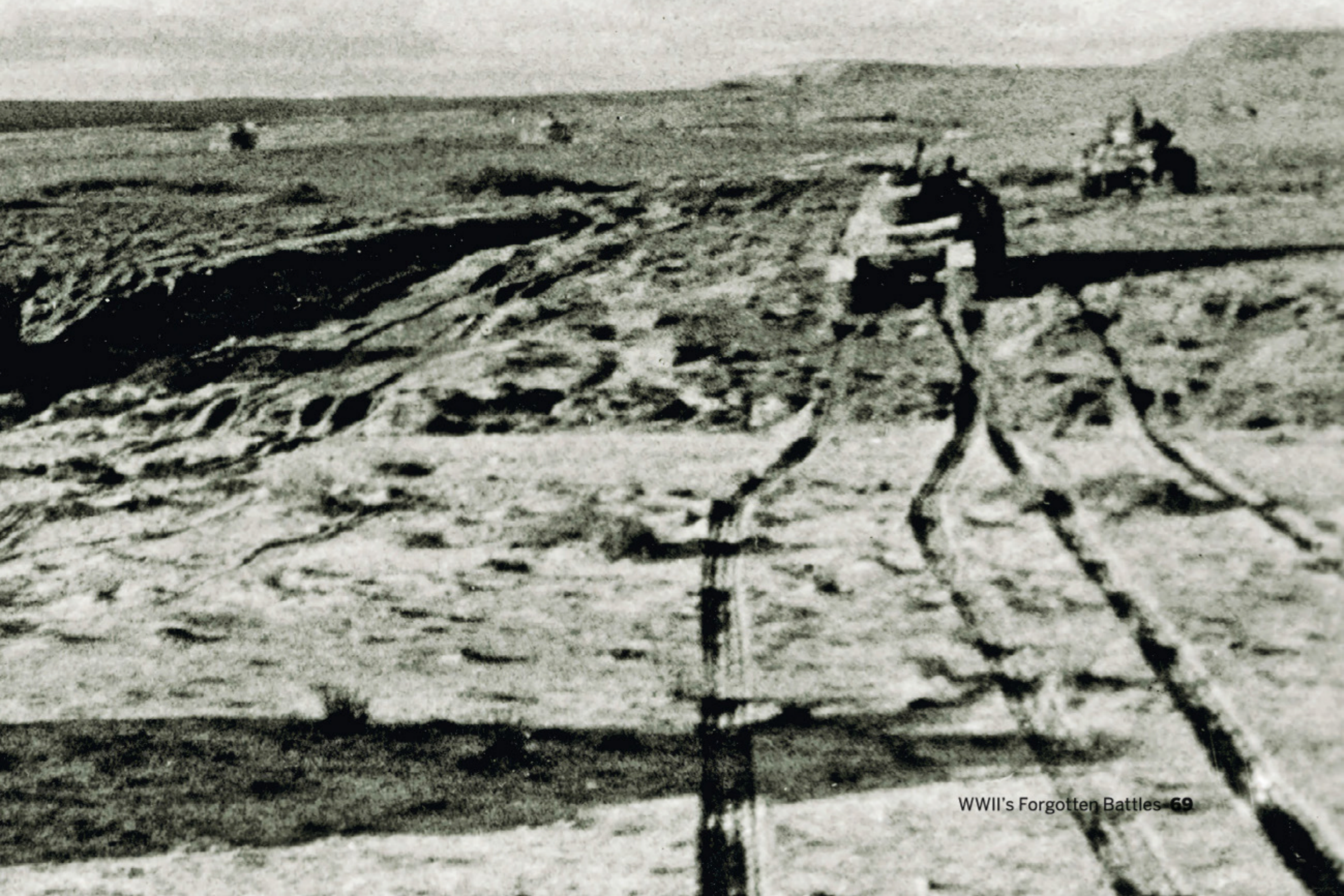
★ After two weeks of waiting, the German 10th and 21st Panzer Divisions finally launched their offensive at Sidi Bou Zid on 14th February 1943, while pushing back into Sbeitla. After Sbeitla was recaptured, the 21st Division continued north towards Sbiba and the 10th Division went towards Kasserine. In the south, the German Afrika Korps attacked Gafsa and continued north.

On 19th February, the Germans broke through the Kasserine Pass and one group continued north towards Thala while another carried on towards Haidra. The situation for the Allies was critical until a British-US force at Thala was able to defeat the Germans' offensive. At Haidra, the Germans were stopped by a group from the US 1st Armored Division. The Germans' attacks were also halted at Sbiba. After artillery fire and air strikes inflicted heavy losses on the Germans, they began to retreat on 22nd February. On the 25th, the Kasserine Pass was again in Allied hands.


Tyska anfall fram till 18 February
Tyska anfall 19–21 February
Allierade motanfall 21–22 February
Kairouan Pass
Kairouan
Fondouk
Front line 21 February
Thala
Youks-les-Bains
Haïdra
Sbiba
Tébessa
Front line 17 February
Front line 14 February
Sbeitla
Front line 18 February
Kasserine
Faid
Kasserine Pass
Sidi Bou Zid
Sened
Maknassy
Gafsa
Front line 14 February
0
20
40 km

LÖNEGARD & CO

300 transport vehicles. The recently appointed Commander-in-Chief of Allied Forces in North Africa and Europe, General Dwight D Eisenhower – who personally visited General Fredendall's bunker at Tébessa – decided to send a trusted friend and proven warhorse to the Kasserine Pass, Major General Ernest N Harmon, former head of the 2nd Armored Division in Algiers. General Harmon's reports formed the basis of the devastating criticism levelled at General Fredendall. Harmon ►



▶ was appalled at the low morale of the US units. He also received information from chiefs of staff and divisions that Fredendall seemed out of touch, ensconced in his bunker, and had also been intoxicated. Harmon felt that General Anderson's growing contempt for the 'Yanks' had also actively contributed to the deplorable position of the US corps, putting pressure on the commanders, who were now trying to sort out the situation. In the middle of the inspection, the Germans launched a renewed attack along the Kasserine Pass against the terrified US troops.

ON 19TH FEBRUARY, Rommel received the go-ahead from *Comando Supremo* (supreme command) in Rome for his plan for the Kasserine Pass. However, the strategy had been revised and Rommel had a hard time hiding his anger. The reason for the setback was the lack of a clear goal, the fact that the legendary general had been slow to act against the Allies in the west, and that in the shadow of the threat to the Mareth Line in the south, Rommel had described the operation at Kasserine mostly as a means of plundering the abundant US depots.

Rommel had based his argument on the needs of the troops. The Germans, like the Italians, suffered from a shortage of everything, and throughout the remaining Tunisian campaign, his Afrika Korps came to appreciate the value of US equipment, especially vehicles. Rommel had intended to take the Kasserine Pass and the great garrison in Tébessa, severely damage the eastern flank of the British First Army, and establish a vital air base in Youks-les-Bains, west of Tébessa – probably where General Fredendall's bunker lay. With the revised plan, he didn't have enough units to capture and keep the terrain; it instead became more of a clean-up operation.

Generalfeldmarschall ROMMEL

BUNDESARCHIV, BILD 146-1973-012-43/CC-BY-SA 3.0

Erwin Rommel was appalled by Comando Supremo's changes to his plan.

UNITS FROM THE German 10th Panzer Division launched a new advance in a north-westerly direction, into the Kasserine Pass, on 20th February. The units went under the collective name Division von Broich, after their commander Friedrich von Broich, a highly competent panzer officer who had been promoted from colonel to major general only five days earlier. There were also Italian units in the attacking force, skilfully trained by the Germans and now with a markedly high combat value.

It was therefore no problem for the 7th *Bersaglieri* (Sharpshooter) Regiment to break through the US lines in a few minutes. The inferior US Lee and Stuart tanks from the 1st Armored Division stood no chance against the Germans' Panzer IV and new Panzer VI Tiger. US unit commanders constantly called for artillery support, which came too late, as the troops had already been forced to withdraw.

The battle became a pursuit of the confused US troops. Rommel divided von Broich's units into two spearheads, each following a path out of the pass to the north-west. The northern force attacked Thala, while the southern force advanced on Haidra. Morale begin to break down among the US soldiers; without decisive leadership, they no longer retreated – it was more of a disorderly escape. The Kasserine Pass was completely open on the night of 21nd February and Tébessa was within the Germans' reach. General Fredendall's troops considered splitting up and fleeing.

GENERAL KENNETH ANDERSON saved the US units. He sent as many troops as he could to the resulting gap. He threw in the 9th Infantry Division, whose entire artillery – 50 guns – had been driven 1,300 kilometres from Morocco. At this point, General Harmon entered the fray. At Thala, he joined a British command, code-named Nick Force, under Brigadier General Cameron Nicholson. Harmon over-ruled General Anderson's order to group the newly arrived US artillery further back at Le Kef. Instead, he ordered the artillery to stay in Thala and fight with the British. Under pressure from General Eisenhower, Anderson and Fredendall were forced to accept Harmon's command in the Kasserine Pass, as neither had any intention of going to the front themselves.

On the morning of 22nd February, the Allies were able, with intense artillery support, to repel further German attacks on the Thala–Haidra line. The German units lacked any additional offensive power, while the US troops used their best resource – field artillery. The heavy shelling forced the Germans to wait until dark before they could withdraw their front units. At the same time, the psychological effect of the two-front war began to make itself felt and Rommel realised that his limited units faced a catastrophe if the British, under Montgomery, attacked Mareth in the south. He therefore ordered a general retreat from the Kasserine Pass. The following day, Allied attack planes arrived in force and the Germans rushed to withdraw. On 25th February, the Kasserine Pass was again in the hands of the Allies. Their losses amounted to 10,000 men (of which 6,500 were Americans), 180 tanks and as many as 700 trucks. The Germans lost 2,000 in dead and wounded, as well as about 30 tanks.

BY THIS TIME, General Dwight D Eisenhower had begun work on organising the new 18th Army

ELIOT ELISOFON/TIME & LIFE PICTURES/GETTY IMAGES

With the help of their artillery, US troops finally managed to stop the German offensive forces. Seen here is a 105-mm howitzer on a semi-trailer.

Group under British General Harold Alexander. The evaluation of the Battle of Kasserine Pass came to be an important factor in that context, especially for the US, which was preparing to establish its new Seventh Army in North Africa. The substandard communications, lack of air supremacy, poor fieldwork and lack of leadership were all noted. Lieutenant General Kenneth Anderson was allowed to remain in his role for the time being, because Montgomery refused to let go of his best corps commander, Oliver Leese, to become the new leader of the First Army. However, US General Omar N Bradley arrived at the Kasserine Pass even before the Germans had been driven out. He confirmed Harmon's reports of Fredendall's lack of leadership during the fighting. What Bradley described was a careless army corps that had lost its purpose and strength. Washington acted and Fredendall began packing his bags in his bunker for the trip home. He never led troops into battle again.

General Bradley tried to take credit for the decisive course of events that now took place, claiming that it was on his advice that Eisenhower looked around for a new commander of the US Army II Corps among the United States' top generals. In reality, Omar Bradley stood aside for a commander whom Eisenhower obviously saw as the only possible choice.

"ROMMEL REALISED THAT HIS LIMITED UNITS FACED A CATASTROPHE IF THE BRITISH ATTACKED MARETH"

And so the new commander came to Tunisia, exactly as legend recorded it, with sirens wailing from his open truck, standing in the back like a Roman centurion. He arrived from Casablanca on 6th March 1943, and The US Army would never be the same again. The newly appointed Lieutenant General George S Patton Jr took the US Army II Corps by storm. A major shakeup and tough discipline was introduced, and less than two weeks later, the revitalised corps defeated the Germans at El Guettar, never to lose again.

Torbjörn Kvist is a freelance writer.

Further reading:
Exit Rommel – The Tunisia Campaign (1999) by Bruce Allen Watson ★ **A Soldier's Story** (1951) by Omar N Bradley ★ **Stauffenberg – A Family History** (1995) by Peter Hoffmann

Salerno 1943

LANDING WITH IMPEDIMENTS

The Allied landing at Salerno started well. But an inexperienced commander – General Mark Clark – and fierce German resistance made Operation Avalanche uncertain. For several days, Clark even planned a retreat.

Text: **MARCO SMEDBERG**

GEORGE RODGER/TIME LIFE PICTURES/GETTY IMAGES

American soldiers wade ashore from a landing craft. The US vanguard met tougher resistance than the British because Clark refused to authorise coastal shelling before the landing.

The commander of the US Fifth Army that was to invade Italy in September 1943 was a controversial choice. Lieutenant General Mark Clark was both ambitious and brave but not very popular. As the US Army expanded at the beginning of World War II, Clark demonstrated a skill for planning and staffing. Ahead of his landing in North Africa in November 1942, his ability to resolve numerous organisational issues impressed General Dwight Eisenhower, the commander of the Allied forces in the Mediterranean. However, Clark had no experience of leading large units in battle. Despite this, he was promoted to lieutenant general and given command of the Fifth Army. While the Allies defeated the remnants of the German Afrika Korps in Tunisia in the spring of 1943 and then invaded Sicily, Clark prepared to land his army in Italy.

Mark Clark aboard the USS *Ancon*, September 1943.

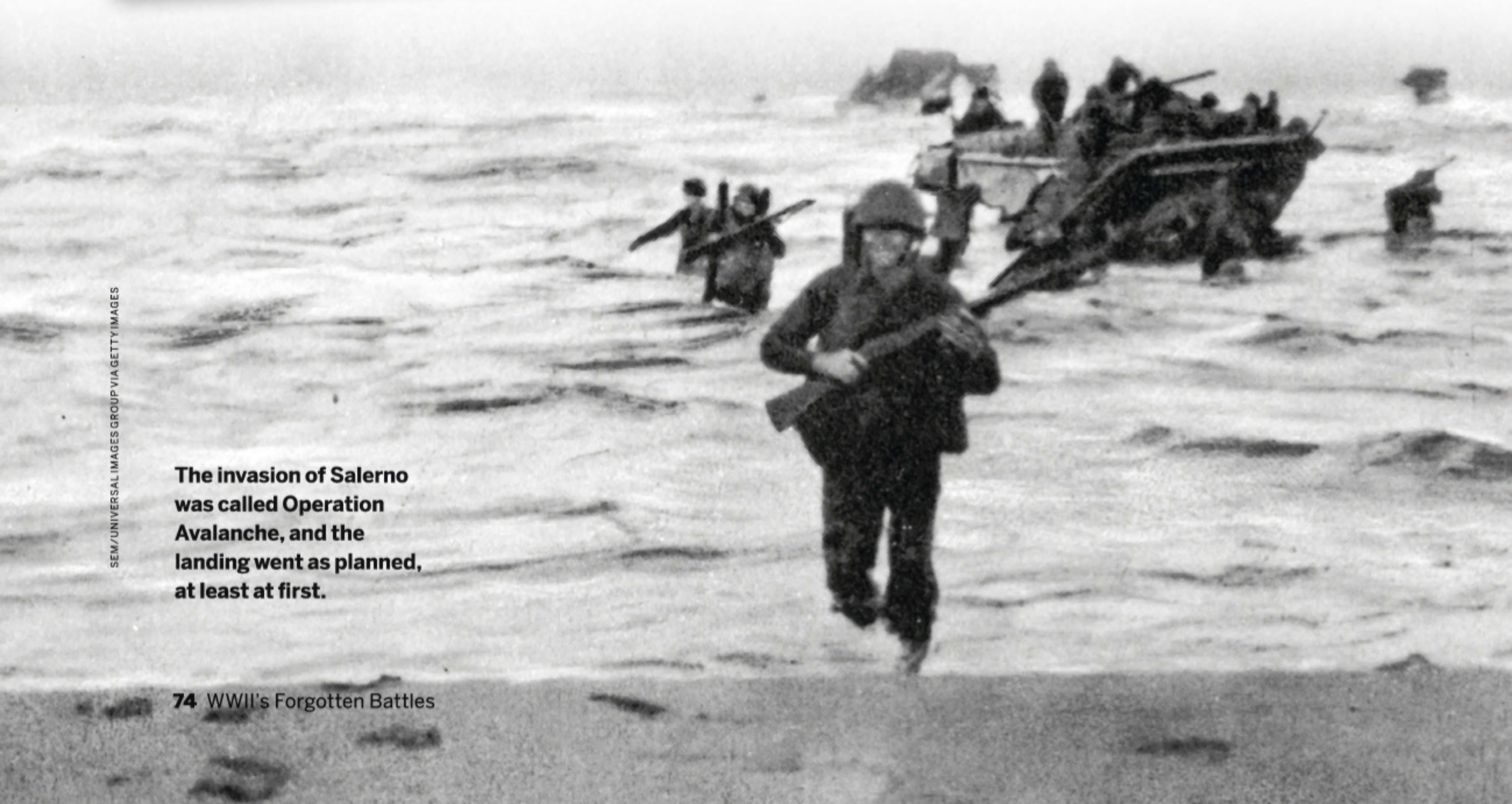
NATIONAL ARCHIVES

Clark was jealous of his colleagues' victories – especially of Patton's success in Sicily – even though his career had progressed much faster. Clark was 11 years younger than Patton but he was promoted to lieutenant general four months before the older man. Happily for Clark, Patton's success in Sicily came to an abrupt end, when he twice accused combat-fatigued troops of cowardice, even going as far as to threaten one of them with his pistol. Eisenhower decided enough was enough. He let Patton go and reinforced Clark's army with Patton's units.

"THE INEXPERIENCED CLARK HAD TO SHOULDER A HEAVY RESPONSIBILITY"

THE ALLIED CAPTURE of Sicily in July 1943 effectively pushed war-weary Italy out of the war. In July, Mussolini was ousted and imprisoned, after which the Italian leadership began secret peace negotiations with the Allies in Sicily. The Allied attacks on the Italian mainland began on 3rd September, when British troops crossed the Strait of Messina and began advancing along Italy's toe. However, the Allies still needed to capture Naples, but to do that, they first had to take Salerno. Naples was too strongly defended to risk a direct attack on the city and the Allies' air support couldn't reach further north from its base in Sicily.

Operation Avalanche was Clark's first major challenge. Since the failed raid on Dieppe in the summer of 1942, the Allies had refined their tactics, but in something as complicated as a major landing operation there was still a lot that could go wrong. The defence had been weak during the invasions of North Africa and Sicily, but a lot depended on a senior commander's ability to reach the right decisions quickly when encountering real resistance. The


The invasion of Salerno was called Operation Avalanche, and the landing went as planned, at least at first.

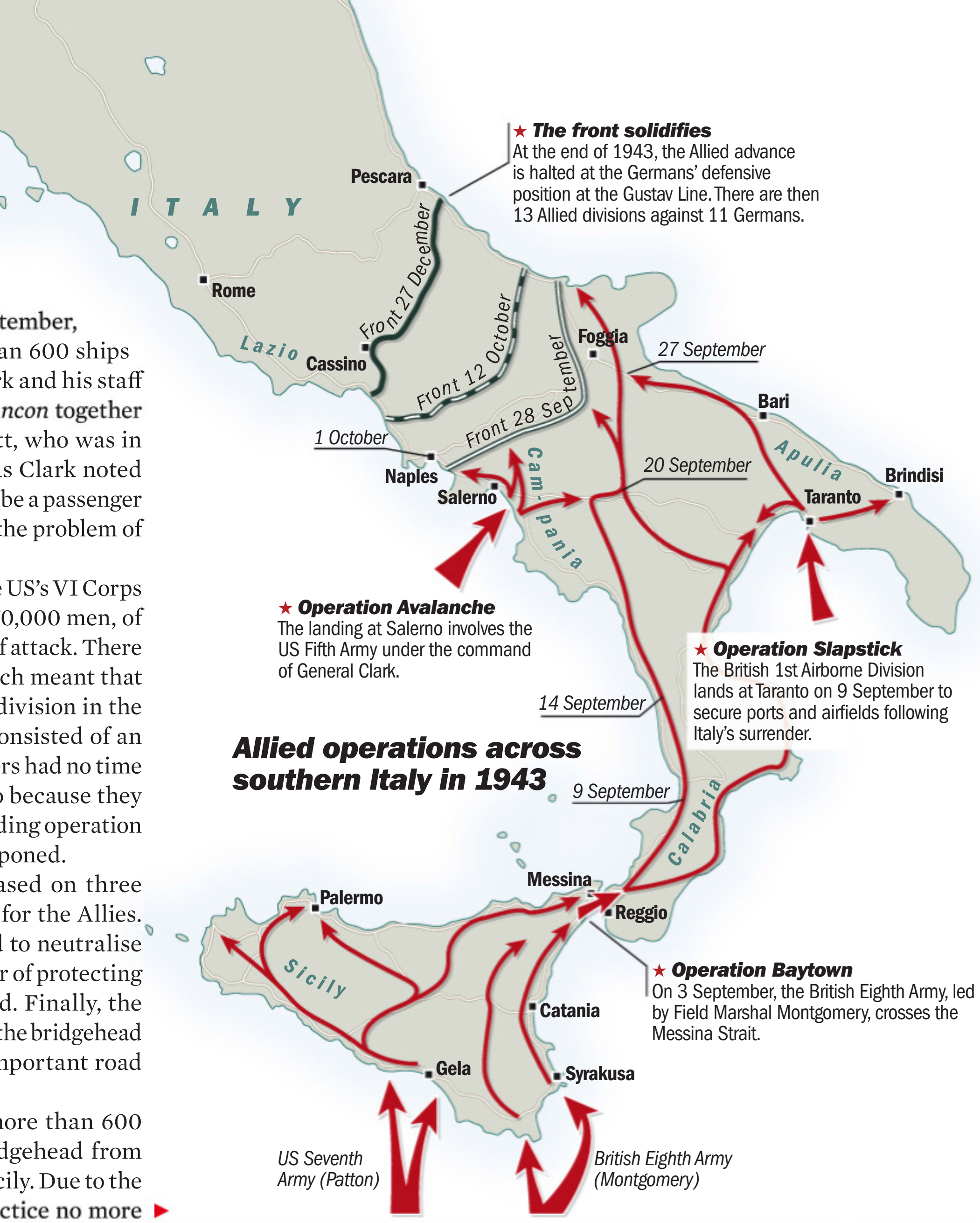
SEM/UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP VIA GETTY IMAGES inexperienced Clark had to shoulder a heavy responsibility.

ON THE EVENING of 8th September, the Allied invasion fleet of more than 600 ships approached the Gulf of Salerno. Clark and his staff were on board the command ship *Ancon* together with US Vice Admiral Henry Hewitt, who was in charge of the invasion fleet itself. As Clark noted in his diary, he was “only too happy to be a passenger while Hewitt wrestled so ably with the problem of getting us ashore”.

The attacking units consisted of the US’s VI Corps and the British X Corps, a total of 170,000 men, of which 55,000 formed the first wave of attack. There was a shortage of landing craft, which meant that the Americans could only land one division in the first wave. The army reserve also consisted of an airborne division, but the paratroopers had no time to prepare for the landing at Salerno because they were involved in planning an air-landing operation in Rome, which was ultimately postponed.

Conventional air support was based on three steps that were becoming standard for the Allies. First and foremost, the aircraft had to neutralise enemy air forces. Then it was a matter of protecting transport and the future bridgehead. Finally, the advance of German reserves towards the bridgehead would be prevented by targeting important road and rail links.

The Allies were able to deploy more than 600 day and night fighters over the bridgehead from aircraft carriers and their bases in Sicily. Due to the distances involved, however, in practice no more ▶


ITALY
Pescara
Rome
Lazio
Cassino
Front 27 December
Front 12 October
Front 28 September
Foggia
27 September
Bari
Apulia
Brindisi
Taranto
20 September
1 October
Naples
Salerno
Campania
14 September
9 September
Calabria
Messina
Reggio
Palermo
Sicily
Catania
Gela
Syrakusa
US Seventh Army (Patton)
British Eighth Army (Montgomery)

Allied operations across southern Italy in 1943

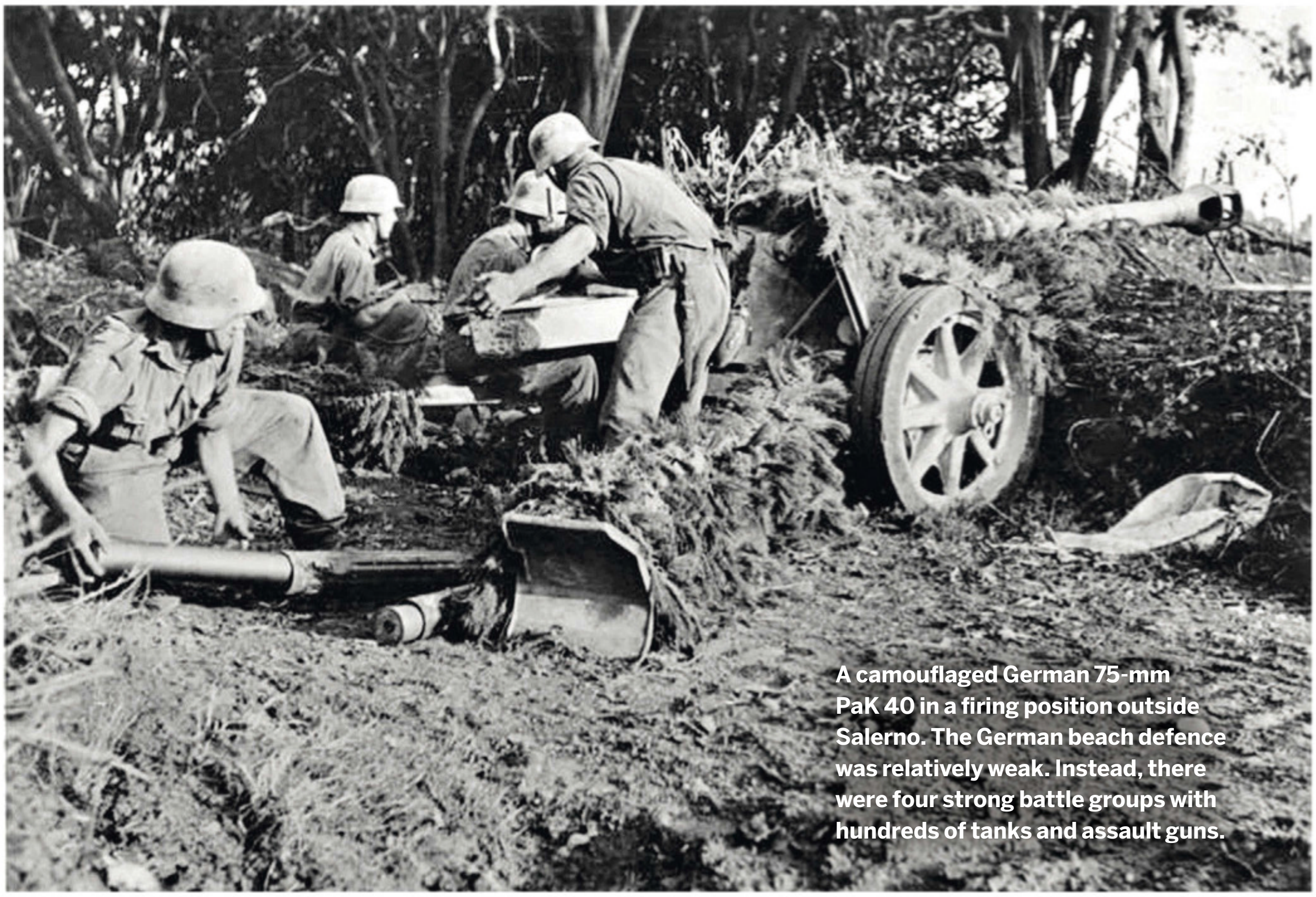
★ **The front solidifies**
At the end of 1943, the Allied advance is halted at the Germans’ defensive position at the Gustav Line. There are then 13 Allied divisions against 11 Germans.

★ **Operation Avalanche**
The landing at Salerno involves the US Fifth Army under the command of General Clark.

★ **Operation Slapstick**
The British 1st Airborne Division lands at Taranto on 9 September to secure ports and airfields following Italy’s surrender.

★ **Operation Baytown**
On 3 September, the British Eighth Army, led by Field Marshal Montgomery, crosses the Messina Strait.

★ **Operation Husky**
The Allies invade Sicily on 10 July 1943, and on 17 August, General Patton’s Seventh Army reaches Messina.



BUNDESARCHIV, BILD 183-J15460/LÜTHGE

A camouflaged German 75-mm PaK 40 in a firing position outside Salerno. The German beach defence was relatively weak. Instead, there were four strong battle groups with hundreds of tanks and assault guns.

than 50 aircraft at a time were in the sky protecting the bridgehead. The landing was also supported by naval gun fire from cruisers, special artillery ships (monitors) and destroyers, as well as landing craft with rocket batteries.

Clark took a conscious risk when he decided against an initial coastal bombardment in order to conceal his exact landing point and maintain an element of surprise. The Americans didn't plan any naval support, and relied instead on calling for backup as the situation demanded. The British, on the other hand, already had a plan prepared to shell their stretch of coastline should it prove necessary.

The British landing area was in the northern part of the bay, south of the city of Salerno itself. The US corps would land eight kilometres further south. In the middle of their attack area lay the ruins of the ancient city of Paestum with its three Greek temples.

During the evening, the news of Italy's surrender was broadcast through the ships' loudspeakers. The troops on board began to hope that the Italian units wouldn't put up a fight. If they were lucky, they would face a disorganised Italian force keen to surrender and an unprepared German defence. In the dark, the invasion fleet slipped into the Gulf of Salerno. According to Clark, it was a beautiful night: "the sea was smooth, the sky was clear". The general could see the mountain peaks outlined in the moonlight

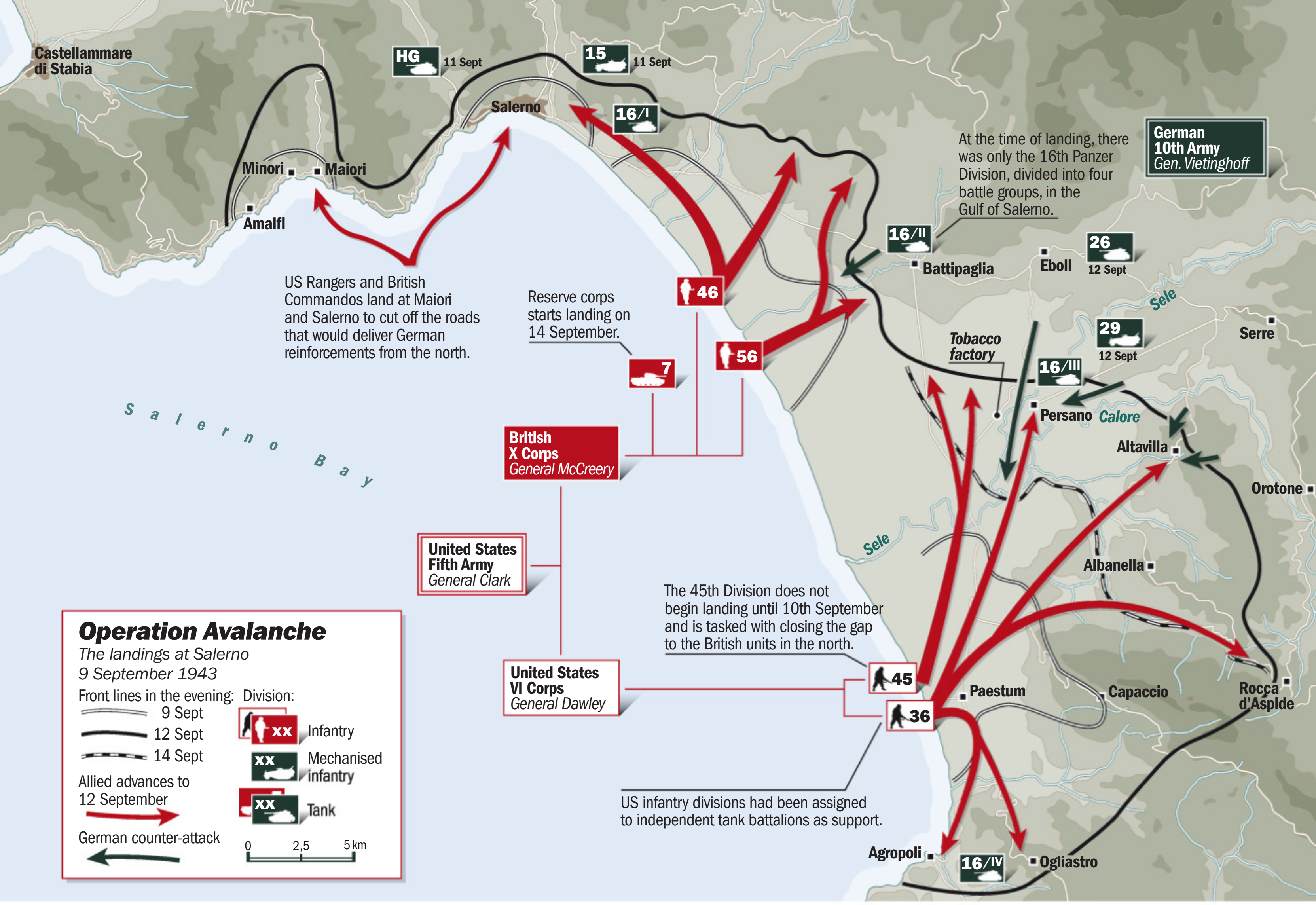
BUNDESARCHIV, BILD 183-R93434

Albert Kesselring organised a massive German counter-attack.

THE HEAD OF the German forces in southern Italy was Field Marshal Albert Kesselring. Under him, the Tenth Army, which consisted of two panzer corps, was commanded by General Heinrich von Vietinghoff.

On 8th September, reports of a nearby Allied invasion fleet prompted Kesselring to order a retreat from southern Italy. In addition, all units in central Italy were placed on high alert. However, it was a difficult situation for the Germans, who now found themselves trying to withdraw their forces and disarm the Italians while simultaneously facing the threat of an Allied landing.

In the Gulf of Salerno, the 16th Panzer Division was already in place. It was one of the strongest German units in Italy, with 15,000 men, 140 Panzer IV tanks and StuG III assault guns, as well as 231 armoured half-track vehicles. Coastal defences



Operation Avalanche

The landings at Salerno

9 September 1943

US Rangers and British Commandos land at Maiori and Salerno to cut off the roads that would deliver German reinforcements from the north.

Reserve corps starts landing on 14 September.

At the time of landing, there was only the 16th Panzer Division, divided into four battle groups, in the Gulf of Salerno.

The 45th Division does not begin landing until 10th September and is tasked with closing the gap to the British units in the north.

US infantry divisions had been assigned to independent tank battalions as support.

Front lines in the evening:
9 Sept
12 Sept
14 Sept
Allied advances to 12 September
German counter-attack
Division:
XX Infantry
XX Mechanised infantry
XX Tank
0
2,5
5 km
Castellammare di Stabia
HG 11 Sept
15 11 Sept
16/I
Salerno
Minori
Maiori
Amalfi
German 10th Army Gen. Vietinghoff
16/II
Battipaglia
Eboli
26 12 Sept
Sele
46
56
7
British X Corps General McCreery
Salerno Bay
Tobacco factory
29 12 Sept
Serre
16/III
Persano
Calore
Altavilla
Orotone
United States Fifth Army General Clark
Sele
Albanella
45
36
United States VI Corps General Dawley
Paestum
Capaccio
Rocca d'Aspide
Agropoli
16/IV
Ogliastro

ERIK LINDHOLM

consisted of a chain of eight barbed-wire-protected outposts that were defended by a platoon of infantry reinforced by field guns. Between the bases, the Germans had only partially mined the terrain so as not to complicate counter-attacks. Behind this thin line of defence there were three relatively strong battle groups ready to carry out counter-attacks, together with the divisional reserve, which was made up of tanks.

AFTER SWEEPING FOR mines and under the cover of air strikes and coastal bombardment, the Allies began their landing at Salerno at 04.30 on 9th September. Farthest to the north, two special force battalions secured rapid access to the roads over the difficult mountains of the Amalfi Coast.

In the northern landing zone, the two British divisions slowly made landfall despite sporadic German resistance. Odd coastal artillery pieces opened fire as it became light and were gradually silenced by naval gun fire. One landing craft was destroyed by aerial bombing. Others were shelled by StuG III guns, so that the battalions they were carrying had to be redirected, causing more delays. Once the assault units reached the shore, they began to advance and expand the bridgehead. Special units began unloading equipment and setting up depots on the beaches.

> **"BRAVE BUT INEXPERIENCED, THEY BECAME STUCK IN THE SAND DUNES"**

As planned, there was no coastal bombardment in the southern landing zone. The Germans were therefore undisturbed as they opened fire on the US troops wading ashore. The 36th Division from Texas made up the vanguard. Brave but inexperienced, they became stuck in the sand dunes as they tried to shelter from German fire instead of advancing. The units soon became muddled in the cramped space and later landing craft were forced to wait until the way was clear, causing delays.

However, the units ashore finally managed to call for naval artillery support and began to fight back, even succeeding in checking a German counter-attack with eight tanks. Against the relatively weak German defence, the US force managed to expand their bridgehead during the day, but not by as much as they had planned. At the same time, the Germans ►

continued to fire artillery at the beach all day. There was still a gap of around ten kilometres separating the British and US corps. Between them lay the River Sele in the middle of the Gulf of Salerno. Aware that German reinforcements were on their way to Salerno, the Allies knew that they had to rapidly increase their strength ashore.

DURING THE FIRST day, the Allies had landed the equivalent of just over two divisions. Initially, the Germans had only the 16th Panzer Division in place but could call in another six divisions. It was a time-consuming process to increase the Allies' numbers and there were several bottlenecks, but the Germans' efforts to regroup were also hampered, especially by air strikes. It wasn't clear which side would win the race. If the Allies managed to land enough units, the bridgehead would hold. If the Germans could build up their strength sufficiently, there was a risk of the whole invasion failing – something that Clark was well aware of.

In terms of management, the initial stage of a landing was always problematic. Clark was with his staff aboard the *Ancon,* out in the Gulf of Salerno. Both his staff and the staff of the two subordinate corps had to wait for the attacking units under the leadership of their divisional commanders to expand the bridgehead so that the senior staff could go ashore. As long as the various staff officers were stuck on the ships, they had a limited understanding of the situation and were dependent on radio reports from the assault units. For that reason, Clark now ordered the commander of the VI Corps, Major General Ernest Dawley, to go ashore, two days earlier than planned. This caused difficulties for the unprepared Dawley and his staff, who were transported separately to the beaches.

The fighting slowed during the night only to intensify again in the daytime. To the relatively unprotected Allied soldiers on the coastal plain, the thousand-metre-high mountains in front of them seemed like an impenetrable wall. Because the Germans did not have units that covered the entire front, however, there were gaps into which the Allies could advance. The battles were often short and chaotic, with many attacks and counter-attacks, and senior commanders on both sides struggled to clearly understand the ever-changing positions.

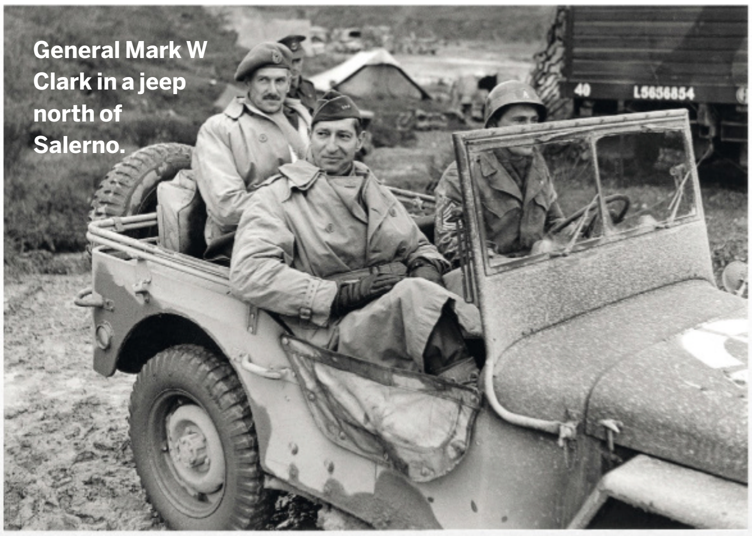
In the far north, the British advanced slowly into Salerno, which was still being defended. However, the attack faltered further south around an airfield that both the Luftwaffe and Allied air forces were

The US troops fought hard to expand their bridgehead while the Germans built up their forces with reserves.

J.R. EYERMAN/THE LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION VIA GETTY IMAGES

desperate to exploit. In the town of Battipaglia, the Germans captured 450 soldiers during a counter-attack. The British were also struggling in the southern part of their area of operation, where they failed to capture a tobacco factory that controlled the crossing points on the River Sele.

Further south, in the US area of the bridgehead, German resistance was weaker and, during the day, the lead units of the next infantry division were brought ashore. Soon they advanced north, reducing the gap between the Allied corps. Two US infantry battalions waded across a tributary and managed to capture one of the bridges over the Sele.

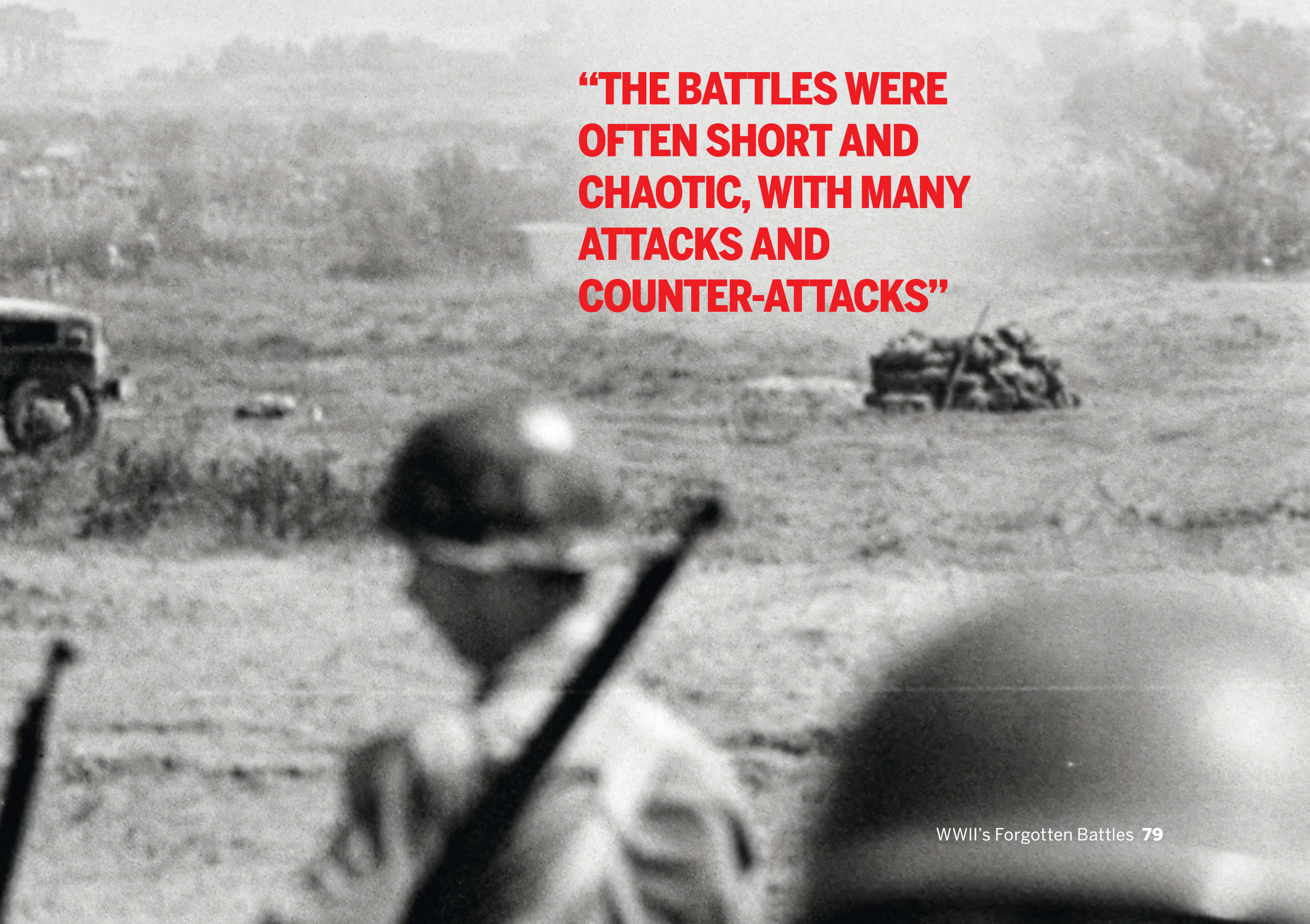

General Mark W Clark in a jeep north of Salerno.

IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM

THE GERMANS' BUILD-UP of forces was also slower than planned. Units from Naples suffered major fuel shortages and were further delayed by the Allied special forces in the mountain terrain north of Salerno. Meanwhile, the panzer units coming from the south consumed much more fuel than expected on the endless serpentine roads. The columns became a mixed mess of units and the advance was only completed when the Germans seized Italian fuel depots.

On 11th September, there was a repetition of the previous day's battles, with new attacks and counter-attacks along the 45-kilometre battle line, but there was no decisive result. In the north, the British managed to clear Salerno itself.

The combination of fierce resistance and hard-to-climb mountains that were still controlled by the Germans negatively impacted the fighting spirit of the Allied soldiers. This didn't escape the notice of the Germans, who heard the British radio reports ►



“THE BATTLES WERE OFTEN SHORT AND CHAOTIC, WITH MANY ATTACKS AND COUNTER-ATTACKS”

SSPL/GETTY IMAGES

After several days of bitter fighting, the US Fifth Army managed to capture the port of Salerno on 11th September.

of how the 16th Panzer Division had stubbornly held off five attacks.

The next day, Clark and his staff landed and grouped near Paestum's ruins. Clark himself spent most of the time riding around in a jeep, visiting subordinate units. Despite thunderstorms the night before, it was now hot and unbearably dusty. Vehicles, bombs and exploding shells all threw clouds of dust into the air. Clark had to cover his face with a handkerchief and felt like "a tall and dusty western bandit on the prowl".

THE INITIATIVE SLIPPED more and more to the German side and the Allied units were pushed back along the entire front. It started to look dangerous. On the beaches, Clark could see all the supplies that could potentially fall into the hands of the enemy and he considered ordering an evacuation, but decided to refrain for the moment. The only way the Germans could capture the shore was to gradually push the Allies into the water. The next day, Clark thought that was actually happening.

ON 13TH SEPTEMBER, fighting broke out along the entire bridgehead and there were signs that the Allies were giving way. Despite the fact that the Germans were exhausted, they still prepared an attack on the centre of the front, between the two Allied corps, where they correctly judged that their enemies were weakest. Delayed by continuous air strikes earlier in the day, three reinforced armoured battle groups managed to reach their starting points, ten kilometres east of the coast, by the afternoon. The battlefield was a gradually narrowing wedge between the River Sele and a tributary called Calore.

The attack itself began shortly after 16.00. The US force consisted of two infantry battalions. Their grouping wasn't right, they were uncoordinated and opened fire too late. When the German panzer-grenadiers were close enough, they climbed down from their half-track tanks and cleared the US positions with machine guns and grenades. Of the 834 US soldiers who started the battle, 500 surrendered and the rest fled. The Germans were convinced they were close to a breakthrough, and a battle group, including around 15 Panzer IV tanks, continued the advance just over an hour later. Their goal was now a ford across the Calore.

Unfortunately for the Germans, there were two US artillery battalions in the area that were able to cover the ground where they were heading with direct fire. The defence was improvised and anyone in the vicinity was thrown in to thicken it. Clark happened to be nearby and intervened personally by ordering the regimental band to arm themselves and defend a hill in the thin US battle line that was protecting the artillery pieces. As the Germans approached the ford, both sides opened fire and "the fields and the woods in which the enemy tanks took cover were pulverised". The Germans made several

Clark's refusal to obey orders

★ Clark's desire to promote all US efforts, including his own, affected his British allies. During the difficult advance in the autumn after Salerno, coordination continued to deteriorate and came to a head in Rome. Just south of the Italian capital, Clark violated the orders of the Army Group's commander, General Sir Harold Alexander, to help the British cut off the retreating Germans. Instead, Clark advanced toward Rome, upsetting many of the group's senior officers. When Alexander later proposed that British units from the 8th Army would participate in the advance, Clark reacted negatively, claiming – albeit in a playful tone – that he would order his troops to fire on the 8th if it marched on Rome. The British and French took Clark's jokes seriously and withheld their units. During the rest of the campaign in Italy, Clark continued to be critical and condescending towards the British, who in turn continued to distrust him. In December 1944, he succeeded Alexander as commander of the 15th Army Group. It was Clark who received the Germans' surrender in Italy on 2nd May 1945. After the war, Clark first became commander of the US Occupation Army in Austria and later led UN operations in the Korean War before retiring in 1953. He died in 1984, aged 87.

Soldiers from the British X Corps monitor the Germans' movements from an observation post in a ruined house.

SGT. OLDHAM/ IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUMS VIA GETTY IMAGES

US soldiers inspect a destroyed German Panzer IV tank on the road outside Salerno.

GEORGE RODGER/THE LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION VIA GETTY IMAGES

attempts to get over the ford but the defence was too strong. At dusk, the Germans withdrew after an hour of intense fighting.

In the evening, a shaken General Clark called Dawley and his two divisional commanders to his command post to confer on how they could close all the holes in their front and avert a catastrophe.

Clark also ordered Admiral Hewitt to begin planning for the evacuation and re-landing of the VI Corps within the British zone further north. In practice, such an operation would be extremely difficult to carry out. Lots of materiel would be lost and there was also the risk of panic if the retreat was threatened by hostile breakthroughs.

THE DAY'S CRISIS had been caused by relatively weak German units. In fact, it was no more than four or five reinforced battle groups – the equivalent of half a German division – that had prompted Clark to order evacuation plans to be drawn up. In the long list of Allied invasions that came after Dieppe, this was the only occasion where an evacuation was planned, and it was largely down to Clark overreacting to the German threat.

The only bright spot in the gloomy situation was the arrival, late at night, of US reinforcements. In a perfect midnight operation, two battalions from the US 82nd Airborne Division parachuted down to the beach, south of Paestum.

THE GERMANS HAD not yet given up hope of hurling the Allies into the sea. They mounted a few more attacks the following day, but the gap they had hoped to find no longer existed. During the night, the Americans had grouped tanks and anti-tank pieces in a front that checked the Germans' armoured advance. Several other offensive attempts were also halted, not least because of effective naval support from the shipboard artillery. In addition, Clark called for Allied air strikes directly in the battle zone, which had a detrimental affect on the Germans, particularly when the remains of Battipaglia were destroyed in the bombing.

The Germans' offensive force was now almost completely depleted and deployed units switched to defence. By the evening, only 22 of the 16th Panzer Division's original 140 tanks and StuG remained. The Allies had now landed the equivalent of six divisions and 200 tanks, which was about twice as many as the Germans had at their disposal.

WHEN CLARK'S EVACUATION plan became known, it was met with great scepticism. Eisenhower, believing that Clark was planning to evacuate the entire bridgehead, was peeved. North of the US bridgehead, the commander of the British X Corps was outraged that he had not been informed of the plans, and indicated that he had no intention of carrying out any evacuation.

Clark attempted to unsettle the enemy by ordering an air landing behind German lines. At midnight, a battalion parachuted down just over 20 kilometres north of Salerno. The intention was for the battalion to take and defend an important crossroads, but the mission failed. The paratroopers were dispersed during the drop, and 200 of the battalion's 600 men were killed or captured. The remainder of the widely spread troops hid and waited for the Allies to advance and rescue them.

ON 15TH SEPTEMBER, Clark's commander visited the bridgehead. The British general Harold Alexander was Eisenhower's deputy and commander of the 15th Army Group, of which Clark's Fifth Army was a part. Alexander and Clark toured the area of operations, visiting subordinate commanders. The general opinion was that despite all the setbacks and problems, the situation still looked relatively bright. From the south, the British forces that had attacked the Strait of Messina and then advanced along the coast were nearing Salerno and were expected to reach the bridgehead within two days.

Clark took the opportunity to report that he was dissatisfied with Dawley's handling of VI Corps. Like Clark, Dawley was a skilled staff officer with very little combat experience. However, many of the problems were of Clark's making. Once ashore, he began giving orders directly to Dawley's units. For Dawley, the pressure of a difficult situation combined with an interfering commander became too great. The fact that something was seriously amiss is confirmed by the fact that Dawley's chief of staff became ill as a result of overwork. However, Eisenhower backed Clark, and Dawley was relieved of command a few days later.

Meanwhile the fighting continued, with Allied planes bombing German defences. The Germans' final offensive push was halted when two British battleships intensified their artillery barrage.

Early on 17th September, after another day of fighting, Kesselring ordered Vietinghoff to begin the withdrawal of the Tenth Army. During the day, many of the German units were nailed down by Allied artillery fire while a temporary defence was organised further back to protect the army's gradual retreat. At dusk, the retreat began in earnest. In the dark, the remaining tanks had difficulty getting through the mountain villages on the narrow roads, where the columns of vehicles often blocked the roads. At the narrowest points, the Germans were forced to demolish houses before they could continue their retreat.

"THE GERMANS HAD NOT YET GIVEN UP HOPE OF HURLING THE ALLIES INTO THE SEA"

The Allied units were exhausted and Clark chose to consolidate the bridgehead, regroup and carry out maintenance before advancing north towards Naples. In the battle for the bridgehead, the US had lost around 1,600 men and the British 4,000. German losses were lower: 3,400 men in total. The fighting had been fierce and the Germans, despite being numerically inferior, had managed to maintain the initiative. But when it came to the crunch, the Allies' ability to call on different types of fire power proved more important than the Germans' capacity to improvise and win advantageous positions.

THE LANDING HAD been successful despite Clark overtaxing his corps commander, losing his head and planning a retreat. Had the Germans been stronger, things could have gone really badly. But the gods of war had chosen to protect Clark, who retained Eisenhower's trust – he had won, after all. But his halo was a little crooked.

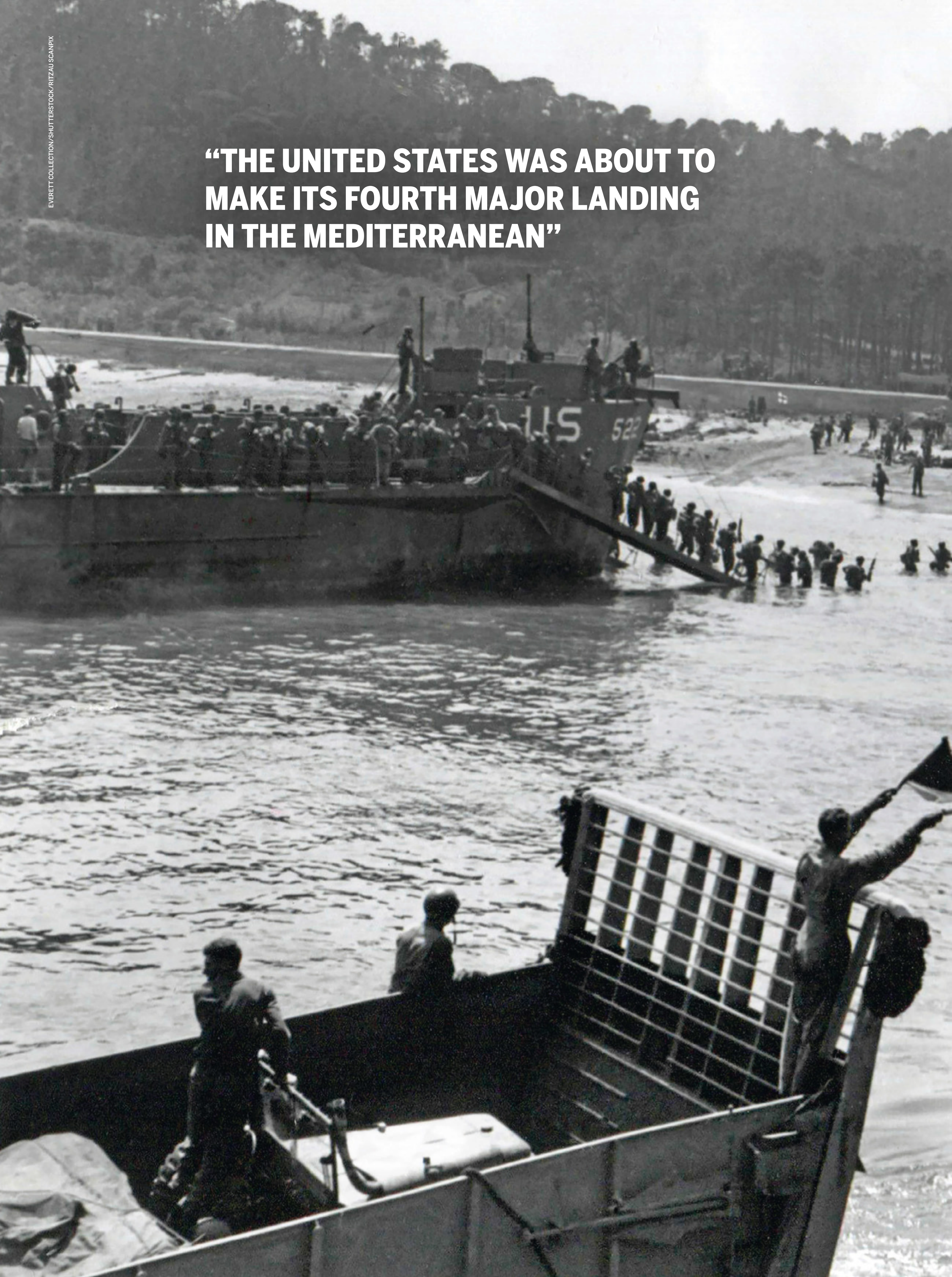
Clark proved to be a troublesome commander. His plans and orders were often standard map solutions, with little regard for terrain or what the enemy could do. And once Clark made his decisions, he refused to discuss them. He was also obsessive about his relationship with the press. Clark insisted on almost always being accompanied by newspaper war correspondents and photographers, whose job was to portray him in a favourable light and highlight his successes.

It took Clark's army just over a week to advance to Naples, which fell on 1st October. During the continued advance north, the Allies were plagued by the cold in the mountains. Rain also delayed operations when the roads became impassable and bridges were washed away. Only at the turn of the year did they reach the Germans' well-fortified Gustav Line, which Clark took five months to break.

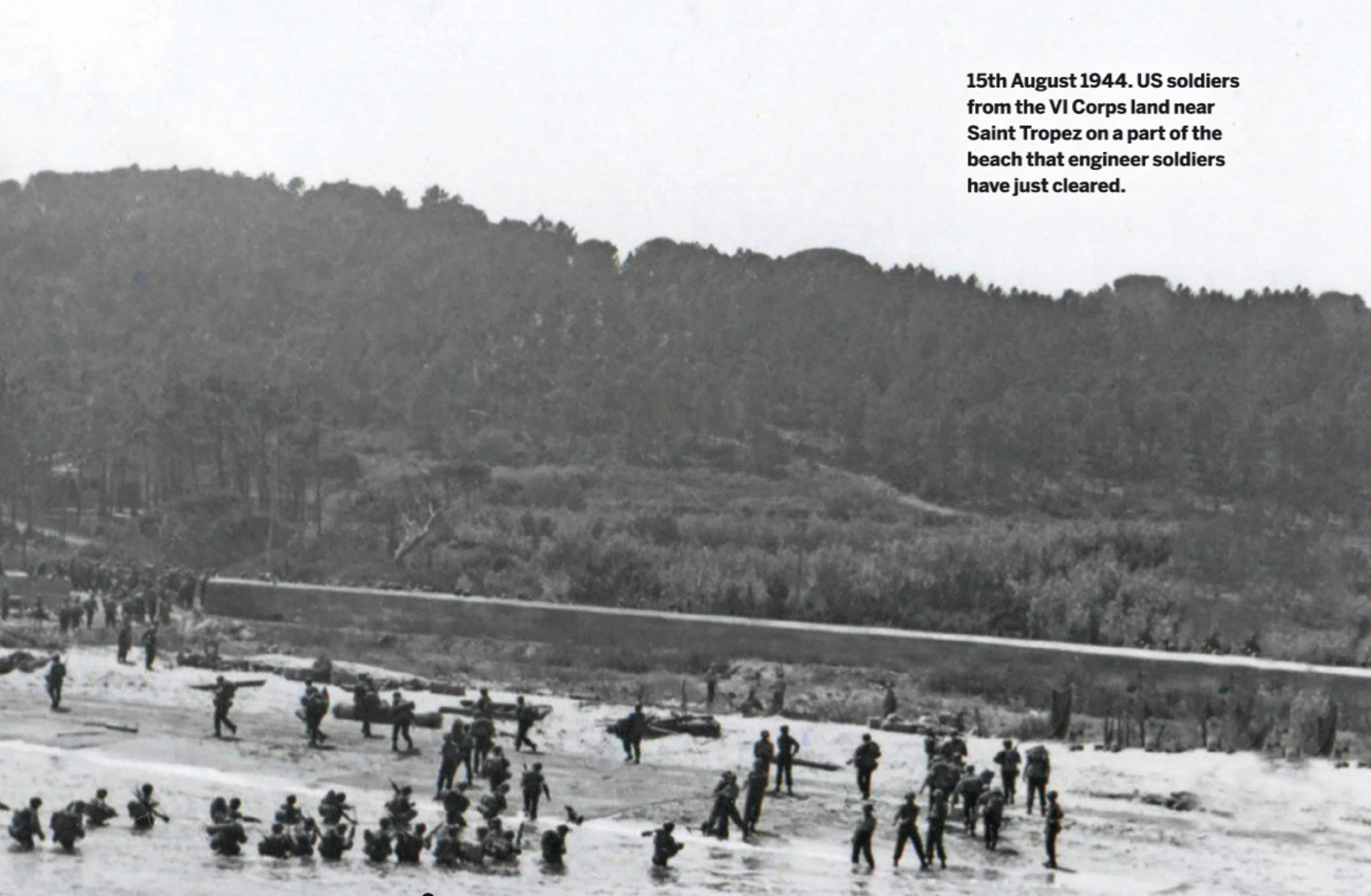
The whole time he was haunted by the end goal: Rome. On 5th June 1944, Lieutenant General Mark Clark entered the Eternal City. But his triumph lasted only a day. On 6th June, the Allies landed in Normandy. While his colleagues reaped success in north-western Europe and the Pacific, Clark was forced to continue his campaign in Italy, but after 6th June 1944, it became a forgotten front. ✪

Marco Smedberg is a military history writer.

Further reading:
Calculated Risk (1950) by Mark Clark
★ **Tug of War – The Battle for Italy 1943–45** (1986) by Dominick Graham & Shelford Bidwell


EVERETT COLLECTION/SHUTTERSTOCK/RITZAU SCANPIX

“THE UNITED STATES WAS ABOUT TO MAKE ITS FOURTH MAJOR LANDING IN THE MEDITERRANEAN”



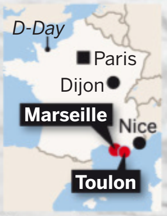
15th August 1944. US soldiers from the VI Corps land near Saint Tropez on a part of the beach that engineer soldiers have just cleared.

Operation Dragoon 1944

INVASION OF THE RIVIERA

On 15th August 1944, the Allies launched Operation Dragoon in the south of France. The goal was to take the ports of Marseille and Toulon, and meet up with the Allies who had begun to break out of Normandy in the north. A fragmented German defence fought frantically to force the enemy back into the sea.

Text: **ANDERS FAGER**



Operation Dragoon focused on Marseille and Toulon.

Since 1942, before they landed in Italy, the Allies had been considering how an invasion of France would work. They wanted to land in the north and south at the same time, and the operations were known as Sledgehammer and Anvil, but eventually changed to the code names Overlord and Dragoon. A lack of landing craft led to the decision to implement Overlord in Normandy first and Dragoon on the Riviera whenever possible, perhaps a couple of months later.

There were issues surrounding the planning of Dragoon. The troops they wanted to use were to be taken from the front in Italy, something that met with opposition from the commanders there. Stalin wanted Roosevelt to increase pressure in the West and de Gaulle wanted the French forces in North Africa to be deployed to liberate France. To make matters worse, Churchill was angry because he felt Stalin and Roosevelt ignored him when he raised his own ideas about operations in the Balkans.

Operation Dragoon was officially revived on 14th July 1944. The plan was to land on the Riviera with Truscott's US VI Corps, take a bridgehead, and then follow up with de Tassigny's French Army B. The goals were to take the ports of Toulon and Marseille, liberate southern France, and meet up with the Allied forces in the north that had just begun to break out of Normandy.

THE WHOLE OF southern France was defended by General Blaskowitz's Army Group G, consisting of the small 19th Army on the Riviera and the even smaller 1st Army on the Atlantic coast. Blaskowitz was a meek, religious man, who had already clashed with the Nazi leadership in Poland, and since then had only commanded in less important operations. His forces were a sorry group, consisting of dubious volunteers of *Osttruppen* (Eastern troops), units armed with captured French weapons, and divisions that were being reorganised. Many divisions had to hold almost 100 kilometres of coast. The only thing on the fortified South Wall that was in reasonably good order was the coastal artillery, which consisted of captured French guns. Another problem for the Germans was the confused chains of command they developed in occupied territories. The navy took care of itself (and part of the coastal artillery), as well as the air force (which also had its own field units and nominal control over all air defences), and the security service, which also waged a low-level war against French partisans. The army had no mandate over any of these.

General Blaskowitz led the German defence of the south of France.

General Truscott led the US VI Corps.

General de Tassigny led French Army Group B.

Blaskowitz and the other German commanders expected another landing after Overlord, probably in the south. He had begun planning to evacuate the south of France, but after the assassination attempt on Hitler on 20th July 1944, retreats were neither planned nor even discussed. However, Blaskowitz continued to secretly consider a retreat to Dijon and moved his only useful reserve, the 11th Panzer Division, to the eastern side of the Rhone.

THE ALLIED FORCE consisted of two very different components. Truscott's VI Corps was comprised of three experienced divisions, an airborne battle group and the mechanised Task Force Butler. Truscott himself was a tough veteran from Guadalcanal, among other campaigns, and was known to take a hard line with 'idiots'. His disembarkation was to be supported by a fleet that included five battleships, 20 cruisers and nine escort aircraft. It could also count on 3,500 aircraft from Corsica and Sardinia. It was planned to land 55,000 men and 6,500 vehicles on the first day.

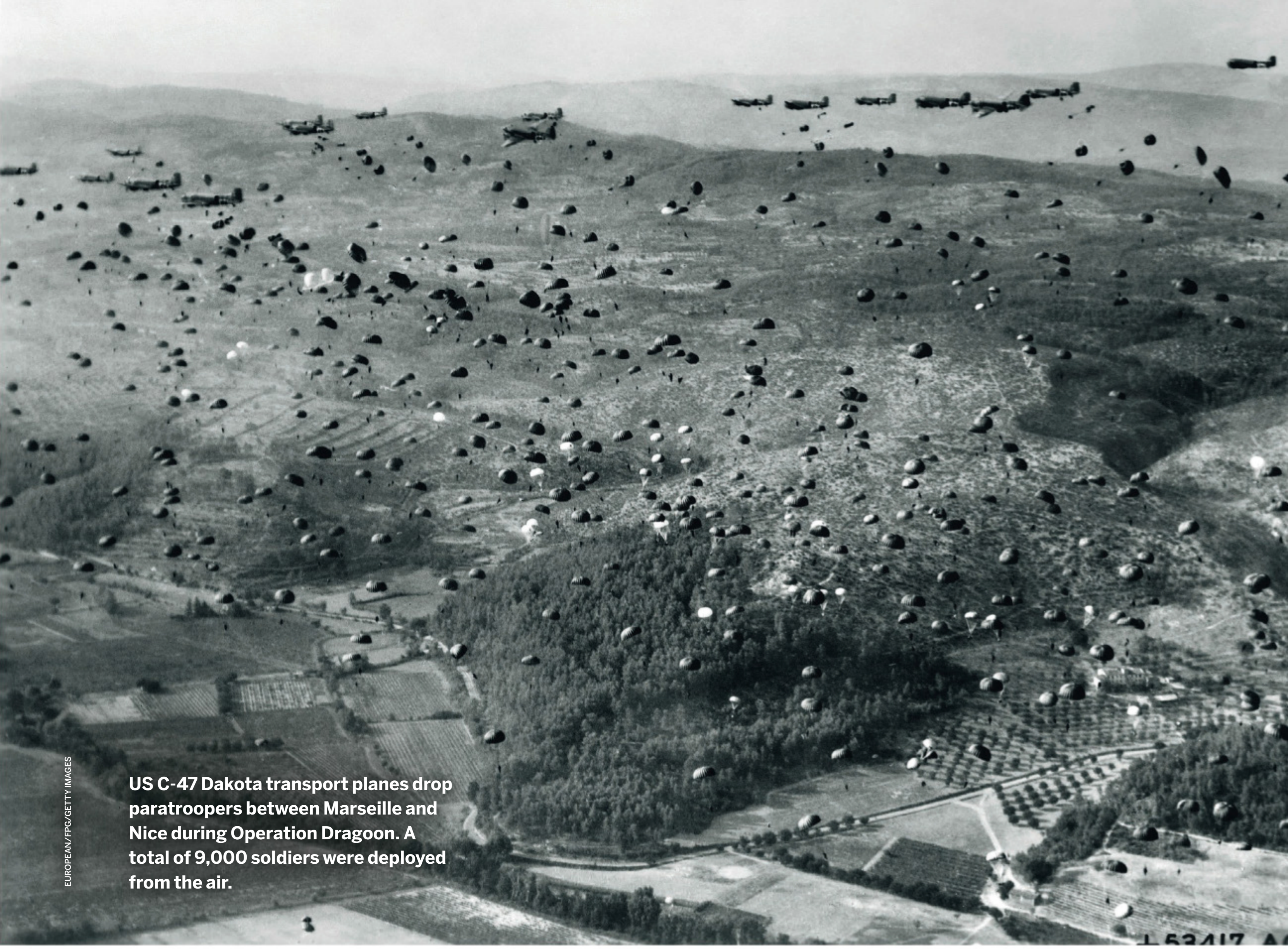
The French Army Group B was a completely different story. It was only slightly larger than Truscott's corps and consisted of an armoured and three infantry divisions. It was made up of men from the French colonies who'd come to save the motherland, led by the fierce and de Gaulle-like de Tassigny, who had escaped from prison in Vichy to unite with de Gaulle.

The army was armed and equipped by the United States, with everything from tanks to pork-free

Multinational command lines

★ In preparation for Operation Dragoon, the Allies had identified certain German coastal artillery batteries as particularly dangerous for the disembarkation. The day before the main force landed, two smaller landings were carried out to knock out the batteries. On the islands of Hyères, east of Toulon, the US-Canadian 1st Special Service Force (a unit known as the "Black Devils" or the less dramatic "Frederick's Fighters", and a precursor of the US Green Berets) carried out a raid, and French commandos landed at Cap Nègre, west of the major landing beaches. Several smaller raids were also carried out to distract the Germans.

The emblem used by the 1st Special Service Force.



US C-47 Dakota transport planes drop paratroopers between Marseille and Nice during Operation Dragoon. A total of 9,000 soldiers were deployed from the air.

EUROPEAN/FPG/GETTY IMAGES

food for its many Muslim soldiers, and consisted of troops from all over French Africa – mainly Algerians and Moroccans, but also from the large French territories in West and Central Africa. The units were of extremely variable quality. Some soldiers had fought for a year in Italy, others were illiterate and barely understood who they were at war with. To this were added a number of smaller units from various French resistance movement factions, which in many cases were already in conflict with the German police.

THE LANDING WAS planned for an area east of Toulon with no high ground. Blaskowitz, of course, realised that was the most likely spot for an invasion, but couldn't do much in the circumstances. Air strikes began in early August to bomb railway networks and important bridges. But, as the situation in Normandy became more and more critical on a daily basis, Blaskowitz received no help. He could only wait.

The United States was about to make its fourth major landing in the Mediterranean and knew how to handle things. The attack began on 15th August 1944. Meanwhile, the German defence in Normandy had collapsed, the Battle of the Falaise Pocket was underway, and in the Soviet Union, Operation Bagration was destroying Army Group Centre.

“HIS FORCES WERE A SORRY GROUP, CONSISTING OF DUBIOUS VOLUNTEERS OF OSTTRUPPEN (EASTERN TROOPS)”

IN THE MORNING, 1,300 bombers attacked the Riviera, which was defended by ten fighter jets. At 07.30 the fleet opened fire. At 08.00, the landing craft began to head towards the South Wall. The 3rd Infantry Division went to Alpha Beach on the left, the 45th Infantry Division to Delta Beach in the centre, and the 36th Infantry Division to Camel Beach to the right. At the same time, nine thousand paratroopers were dropped behind the German units defending the shores, and the French ►

KEYSTONE-FRANCE/GAMMA/GETTY

A Sherman tank fires at German positions during battles in Marseille, here at Saint-Vincent de Paul Church. 26th August 1944.

resistance movement launched a major coordinated operation that closed the road network in the south of France. It was a show of strength. The South Wall went up in smoke in a few hours and the German artillery fired blindly when its observers were wiped out. At Delta and Alpha, the landings proceeded as planned, occasionally disturbed by Eastern Europeans in German uniform who wanted to surrender. At Camel Beach, the Allies met some resistance, but with substantial support, they came ashore, albeit later than planned.

By evening, the US had landed an incredible 100,000 men and lost fewer than 100, most of them when a radio-controlled Hs 293 bomb sank a tank landing craft. The paratroopers lost another 100 men, most in accidents.

The biggest problem during the day was that some radio-controlled drones, loaded with TNT intended for blowing up obstacles on the beaches, ran amok. The radio frequencies used to control them were jammed by German signals, and the rampant bombs had to be sunk by destroyers.

THE RESISTANCE MOVEMENT and the bombings completely destroyed Army Group G's lines of communication. Blaskowitz likened it to leading an army in the Middle Ages. He should have had more carrier pigeons. General Neuling, whose LXII Corps defended the shores, found that his staff was surrounded by paratroopers. He handed out orders as best he could and at dawn on 16th August, four battalions attacked the landings. It was four tank-less battalions against nearly 30 that had almost unlimited support. After a day of confused fighting, the German units that hadn't been called in retreated and Neuling was captured.

At the same time, the French had begun to land without being caught up in the German attack, and were marching towards Toulon. On the morning of 17th August, Blaskowitz gave up all hope of sending his enemy back out to sea. On the same day, it became obvious that the action at Falaise was a disaster, and Hitler finally allowed the army groups in France to withdraw. The Allies, who had cracked the Germans' Enigma codes, soon realised that they were now in a race.

IWM

A Spitfire from the RAF returns to Corsica after a mission during the operation.

OPERATIONS CONTINUED on three fronts. De Tassigny's French troops went to Toulon and Marseille, while the US forces went to the north and a smaller number moved to the east. Blaskowitz ordered one division to hold Toulon and another Marseille. Both had to destroy the ports. All other Germans in the south of France had to hurry north towards the Vosges – near the Rhine Valley – and the homeland. General von Wietersheim's 11th Panzer

“DE TASSIGNY’S FRENCH TROOPS WENT TO TOULON AND MARSEILLE, WHILE THE US FORCES WENT TO THE NORTH”

Division would defend the column along Highway 7. Meanwhile, Truscott argued with his commanders about how things should be handled. He wanted to take command of the French armoured division, but had to make do with his own units.

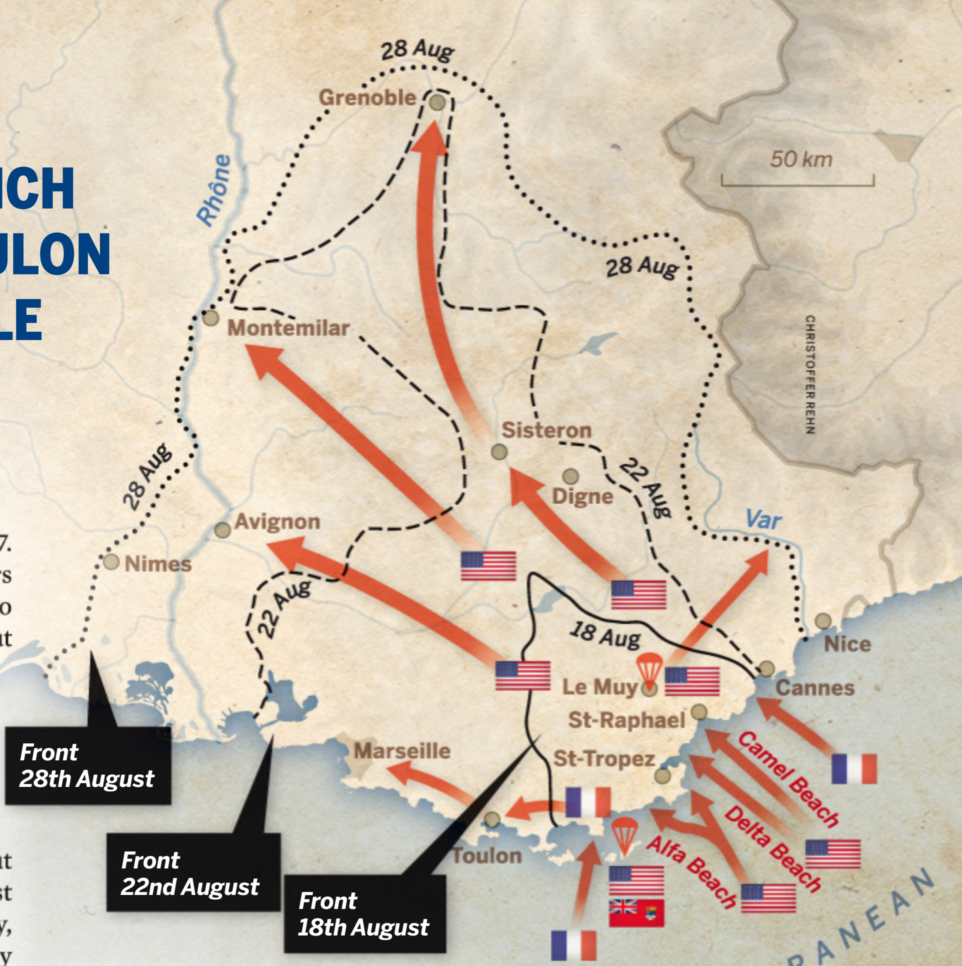
The French 3rd Division reached Toulon on 19th August and set off for Marseille the next day. The French units were excited about how easy the advance was. But what had almost been a party on the march came to an abrupt end as they approached Toulon, where a thin but determined German defence awaited. On 21st August, three French divisions attacked the city, supported by US bombers. The Germans initially put up a fierce resistance, but were driven back to their naval base, where they were eventually supported by coastal defence batteries manned by submarines that bombed the quay. After five days of fighting, 17,000 Germans surrendered in the city.

IN MARSEILLE, FRANCE’S second largest city, the situation was initially worse for the Germans as the resistance movement began to capture several areas, even before de Tassigny’s troops arrived. Some resistance fighters also fought among themselves – certain groups within it saw each other as greater enemies than the Germans.

When the regular troops began to assert themselves, the German defence quickly collapsed and the 7th Armoured Regiment practically paraded into the city. On 27th August, the city’s commander surrendered, and two days later, so did the Germans who’d been holding several forts in the port. Eleven thousand men were taken into captivity.

One of the reasons for capturing the two port cities had been to improve the supply situation for the Allies in France. But the Germans had been thorough with their blockades; in Marseille alone, 25 ships were sunk. The clearing up operation would prove to be just as effective, though. By the end of September, the Allies had unloaded almost 100,000 tonnes in Marseille.

Meanwhile, Cannes and Nice had been liberated by paratroopers sent east to protect Truscott’s right flank. In the relatively easy ‘Champagne Campaign’, paratroopers stormed German units to the east and ►



CHRISTOFFER REHN

The German defence broke down quickly after the landing on 15th August 1944, and the Allies could advance north without much difficulty.

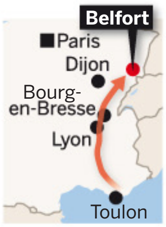
German 8.8-cm Flak 36 gun on the south coast.

BUNDESARCHIV, BILD 101I-258-1324-18/MICHELJACK/CC-BY-SA 3.0

▶ took up position on the River Var, where they would remain until April 1945, when the German defence of northern Italy collapsed.

Truscott's attempt to capture the quarter of a million Germans who retreated north along the Rhone is a rare example of scattered units being chased by unsupported troops. The German units knew nothing more than the direction in which they were heading, but fought on according to their mission principles.

Truscott repeatedly tried to cut off their retreat route along Highway 7, but found that he was short of ammunition and fuel. Most embarrassing was when Task Force Butler, which was speeding north along the roads closest to the Alps, reached Grenoble, which had just been abandoned when the 157th Reserve Division marched towards the Alps following contradictory orders. There was a catastrophic hole in the German flank for a few hours, but Butler ran out of fuel and was unable to take advantage of the situation.



The Allies advanced on Belfort in the Vosges.

ON 19TH AUGUST, General John E Dahlquist and his 36th Division reached Highway 7 at Montélimar, but counter-attacks from the 11th Panzer Division prevented him from cutting off the route. He received reinforcements but no ammunition, so could only direct air strikes towards the road. The Germans counter-attacked with the 11th Panzer Division and units from the Luftwaffe, but despite von Wietersheim himself leading a tank attack, supported by large railway guns, they got nowhere. For several days, the fighting at Montélimar continued with neither side gaining the upper hand, while German units streamed past on Highway 7, chased down the road by US attack aircraft.

On 25th August, the Germans launched a new counter-attack, but that wasn't successful either. Dahlquist was able to fire at the German columns, but didn't stop them. Truscott wanted to dismiss him but changed his mind when he saw the landscape they were fighting in. By 28th August, most of the Germans had passed by and the fighting had subsided. Dahlquist took 8,000 prisoners. In addition, 4,000 destroyed vehicles lay in front of his positions.

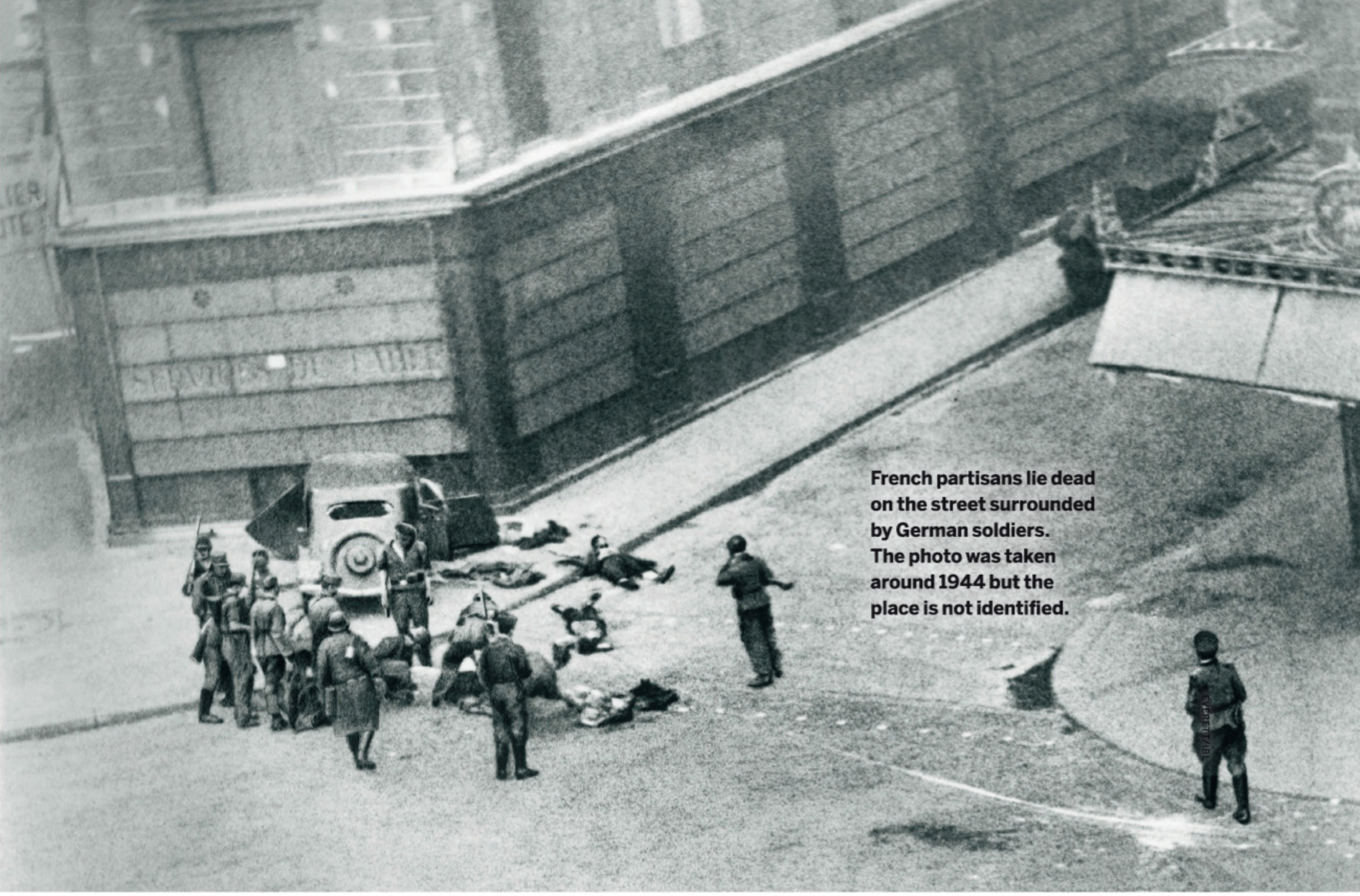
> **"AT THE COST OF 3,000 US TROOPS AND 10,000 FRENCHMEN, HALF OF FRANCE HAD BEEN LIBERATED IN FOUR WEEKS"**

The pursuit of what resembled a mass migration raged on. The Germans blew up bridges behind them; Truscott tried to go around, and von Wietersheim's tired 11th Panzer Division struck back. On 1st September, they clashed at Merimieux and the 45th Division was forced to withdraw. On 2nd September, the 36th Division arrived in Lyon to find chaos. French resistance fighters battled German stragglers and each other. The city fell two days later and a two-day party broke out that slowed the US troops as much as the fighting.

THE 45TH DIVISION made one last attempt to cut off the German retreat at Bourg-en-Bresse. They failed to capture the city and a squadron of armoured vehicles that made it into the town was wiped out

Partisans with arrested French collaborators in Lyon in 1944.

MONDADORI VIA GETTY IMAGES



French partisans lie dead on the street surrounded by German soldiers. The photo was taken around 1944 but the place is not identified.

SHUTTERSTOCK/RITZAU SCANPIX

by the 11th Panzer Division, which was now, for the third time in its history, little more than a battalion.

On 10th September, Truscott met units from Patton's Third Army and reached the Vosges. Despite a severe lack of supplies, he wanted to push through the Belfort Gap. But on 14th September, he was ordered to halt. The next day, 20,000 stragglers from the German First Army surrendered. Truscott wanted to continue attacking while the Germans were in disarray; it would cost more to attack later.

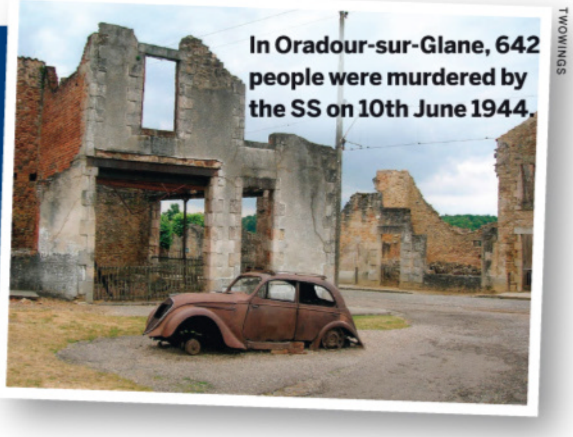
OPERATION DRAGOON WAS subsequently criticised for taking resources from Normandy and Italy, although it was difficult to deny that it was a success. At the cost of 3,000 fallen Americans and 10,000 Frenchmen, half of France had been liberated in four weeks, and Toulon and Marseille came to serve as ports for a third of all supplies to the forces in France. Around 7,000 Germans fell and another 130,000 were captured, despite the fact that the main parts of Army Group G escaped.

Blaskowitz was replaced by General Balck, who made the next six months of fighting in the Vosges hell for the Allies. Von Wietersheim's division was upgraded only to be reduced to a battalion for the fourth time in the Battle of the Ardennes. Truscott became commander of the Fifth Army in Italy and led it to victory.

Anders Fager is a reserve officer and author.

War crimes on both sides

★ Many war crimes were committed by German units in the fighting against the French Resistance, the most famous being the massacre at Oradour-sur-Glane. The Resistance was also quick to abuse Germans and collaborators. The latter were plentiful in the former Vichy area. In the town of Digne, the German defenders surrendered only after being promised protection against the resistance movement.



In Oradour-sur-Glane, 642 people were murdered by the SS on 10th June 1944.

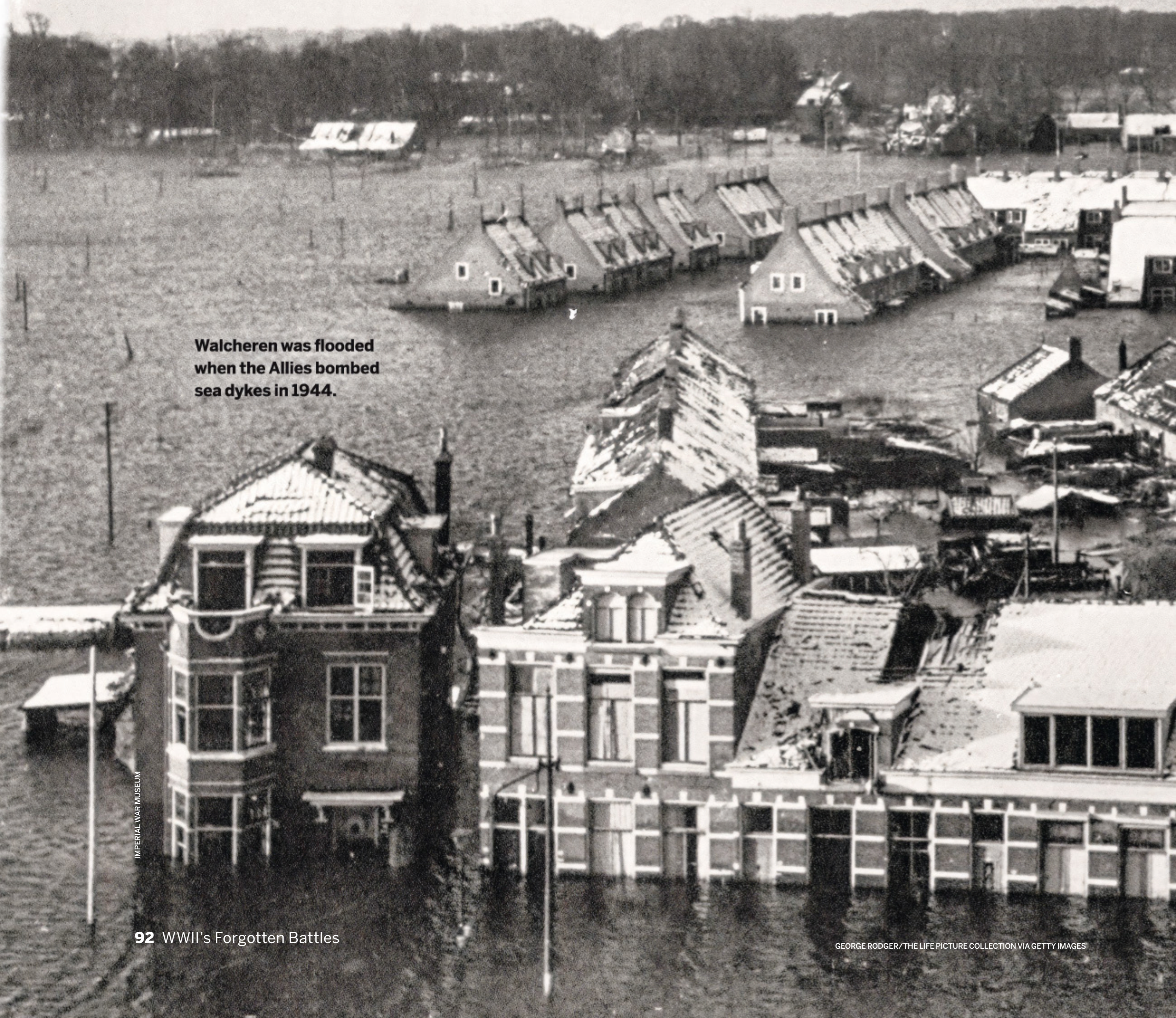
TWOWINGS

Operation Infatuate 1944

Island flooded in attack

In order to use the port of Antwerp, the Allies had to defeat the Germans on the island of Walcheren. The solution was drastic: the island was flooded while the invading forces attacked from the sea.

Text: **KARL GUNNAR NORÉN**



Walcheren was flooded when the Allies bombed sea dykes in 1944.

IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM

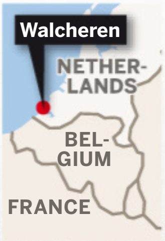
GEORGE RODGER/THE LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION VIA GETTY IMAGES

In the first light of morning, the commandos in their landing craft could scarcely make out the darkened coast where their German foes were waiting. They were taking part in Operation Infatuate I, a surprise attack on the small port town of Vlissingen on the island of Walcheren, on 1st November 1944. In the main boat were the two commanding officers, Donkin and McVeigh. At 41 years old, a miner and father of nine, Donkin was the eldest. McVeigh had been beside him in No. 4 Commando ever since they were evacuated from Dunkirk in 1940. Together they had applied for the Royal Marine Commandos, but their partnership would soon come to an abrupt end.

Six groups from the British No. 4 Commando were deployed in the attack and when the landing craft reached their chosen site, each soldier knew exactly where he was going and what he was expected to do. This first wave of attacks against Vlissingen was not about landing large numbers of soldiers; the commando groups had been drilled in advance to perform specific tasks instead. If the mission didn't go well, they would at least have done the best they possibly could.

War is always life-threatening, but even more so for the British commandos. They were well aware that the Führer had ordered that they be executed if captured.

THE ISLAND OF Walcheren was the strongest fortification along the entire Atlantic Wall. That may be why Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery ►



Walcheren was an island, today a peninsula, located near the Belgian border.

ignored it when he planned Operation Market Garden further north in the Netherlands in record time. At that point, Montgomery was already foreseeing himself in northern Germany in a race against his US rival George Patton.

When the Germans turned the ports of Calais, Boulogne, Dunkirk and Le Havre into fiercely defended fortresses, the Allies surrounded them completely, then left the ports to be dealt with later. Montgomery might have been hoping for a similar miraculous solution to the Walcheren problem as well. Although the huge Belgian port of Antwerp had already fallen unharmed into Canadian hands on 8th September, it could not solve the enormous logistical problems that would plague the Allies until they also secured Walcheren.

THE ADVANCING ARMIES required an enormous amount of soldiers and ammunition, vehicles and petrol. Everything came by ship, and everything had to be unloaded partly in the Mulberry harbour established in Arromanches, and partly in the port of Cherbourg, which was badly in need of repair. From there it had to be driven by truck to the front, which moved forward day by day.

There was no simple solution to the logistics problem until the innovative Canadian Lieutenant General Guy Simonds had a brilliant idea. Ahead of the storming of Falaise in August, he'd come up with a creative solution to the Allied shortage of armoured personnel carriers. He simply had the barrels removed from a number of M7 Priest howitzers. The armoured vehicles could then be packed with infantrymen, saving many lives. The vehicles were dubbed "defrocked priests" with typical military humour.

Now Simonds hatched the unorthodox idea of flooding the entire island of Walcheren and then invading via the water. On 3rd October 1944, Lancaster planes from RAF Bomber Command began to transform the island into a lagoon. With 8,000 tonnes of bombs, the first giant hole was opened in the dykes that had kept the North Sea off Walcheren since the Middle Ages. More attacks in other places followed. The North Sea flowed in, and both defending Germans and attacking British troops had to fight in the seawater, sometimes up to their armpits.

IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM

One of many German artillery pieces and concrete bunkers on Walcheren. Taken from Westkapelle.

"WALCHEREN WAS THE STRONGEST FORTIFIED PART ALONG THE ATLANTIC WALL"

This all happened with the knowledge of the Dutch government in exile. Although Walcheren was ruined, the locals preferred seawater to Germans. How the soldiers could stand going into and even fighting in the icy North Sea in October and November, one can hardly imagine.

LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA

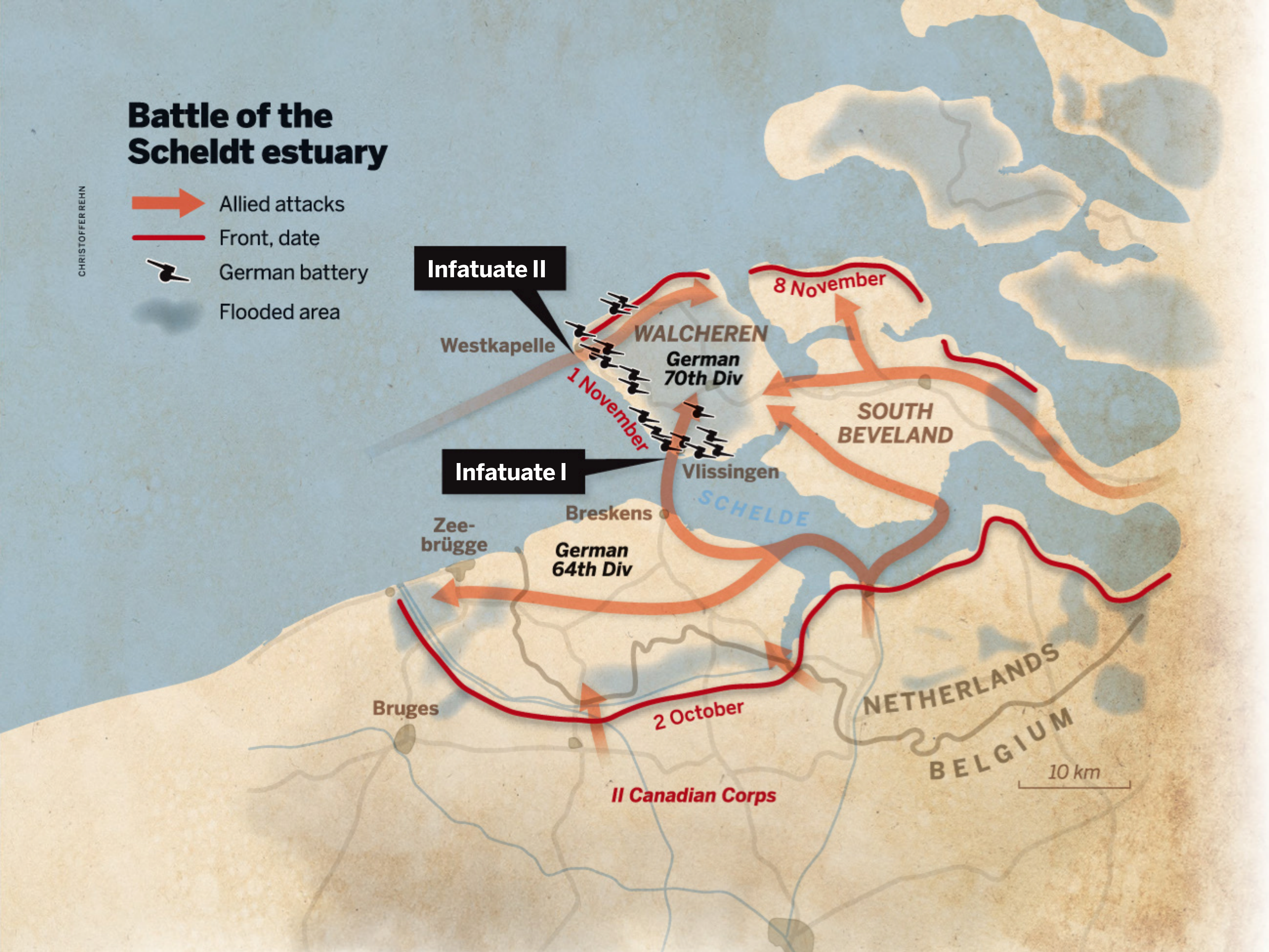
Guy Simonds came up with the idea of flooding the island.

THE BATTLE FOR the Scheldt estuary consisted of several phases. The first consisted of a Canadian division clearing the area north of Antwerp and continuing on to Södra Beveland, a neighbouring island to Walcheren. Meanwhile, Canadian troops from another division pushed the Germans on the Belgian mainland west of Antwerp, towards the city of Breskens.

This resulted in a pocket where the Germans surrendered on 3rd November after heavy fighting. The two-part Operation Infatuate I and II, of which Donkin and McVeigh participated in number I, was the hardest nut to crack. Because the island of Walcheren protected the largest port behind the Atlantic Wall, it was also the best fortified. There were an estimated 7,000-10,000 Germans on the island, which Hitler had given the honour of becoming a fortress on 3rd September. The order was the usual: fight to the last bullet and last man. The troops were organised into three sections, along with additional support from the Luftwaffe.

THE KRIEGSMARINE (GERMAN Navy) mustered two regiments in about 44 batteries, of which 27 had bigger barrels with the capacity to sink large ships. The navy also had smaller boats with explosives. The crew was of the highest quality, unlike the static German infantry, which was in far from prime condition.

In the 70th Infantry Division, 90 percent of the troops had stomach problems and were on a special diet. The division had also been deprived of its heavy weapons and the best battle groups. There was also a fortress battalion, barely equipped with



Battle of the Scheldt estuary

Allied attacks
Front, date
German battery
Flooded area
Infatuate II
Infatuate I
Westkapelle
WALCHEREN
German 70th Div
1 November
8 November
SOUTH BEVELAND
Vlissingen
SCHELDE
Breskens
Zee-brügge
German 64th Div
Bruges
2 October
NETHERLANDS
BELGIUM
10 km
II Canadian Corps

CHRISTOFFER REHN

"ON 3RD OCTOBER 1944, PLANES FROM RAF BOMBER COMMAND BEGAN TO TRANSFORM THE ISLAND INTO A LAGOON"

British troops advance along the shore at Vlissingen on 1st November 1944. The smoke in the background comes from artillery on British ships.

IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM

booty from the French Army. The fighting spirit among the Germans was, naturally, mixed after the hardships they'd faced, but the fear of reprisals against their families, deserter executions, and widespread Nazi fanaticism meant that the Allied attackers couldn't discount the Germans' strength.

The defences around Vlissingen where No. 4 Commando was to land were increased with the usual German thoroughness. The entire beach was surrounded by barbed wire barriers and packed with mines and stakes to defend against landing craft. Some were topped with landmines, where a nudge from a craft triggered an explosive charge that was powerful enough to knock out a tank. The entire beach could be covered by fire from machine guns and anti-tank guns that were well protected behind concrete barriers. As if this were not enough, the anti-aircraft guns could also emit a hail of fire.

The task of the heavier main artillery further inland was, of course, to knock out ships on their way to Antwerp. But the guns could also be aimed at landing craft at the edge of the beach. In short, the Germans were a formidable foe, far superior to the forces that met the Normandy landings on 6th June.

The commandos' Fairbairn-Sykes knife was 30 cm long.

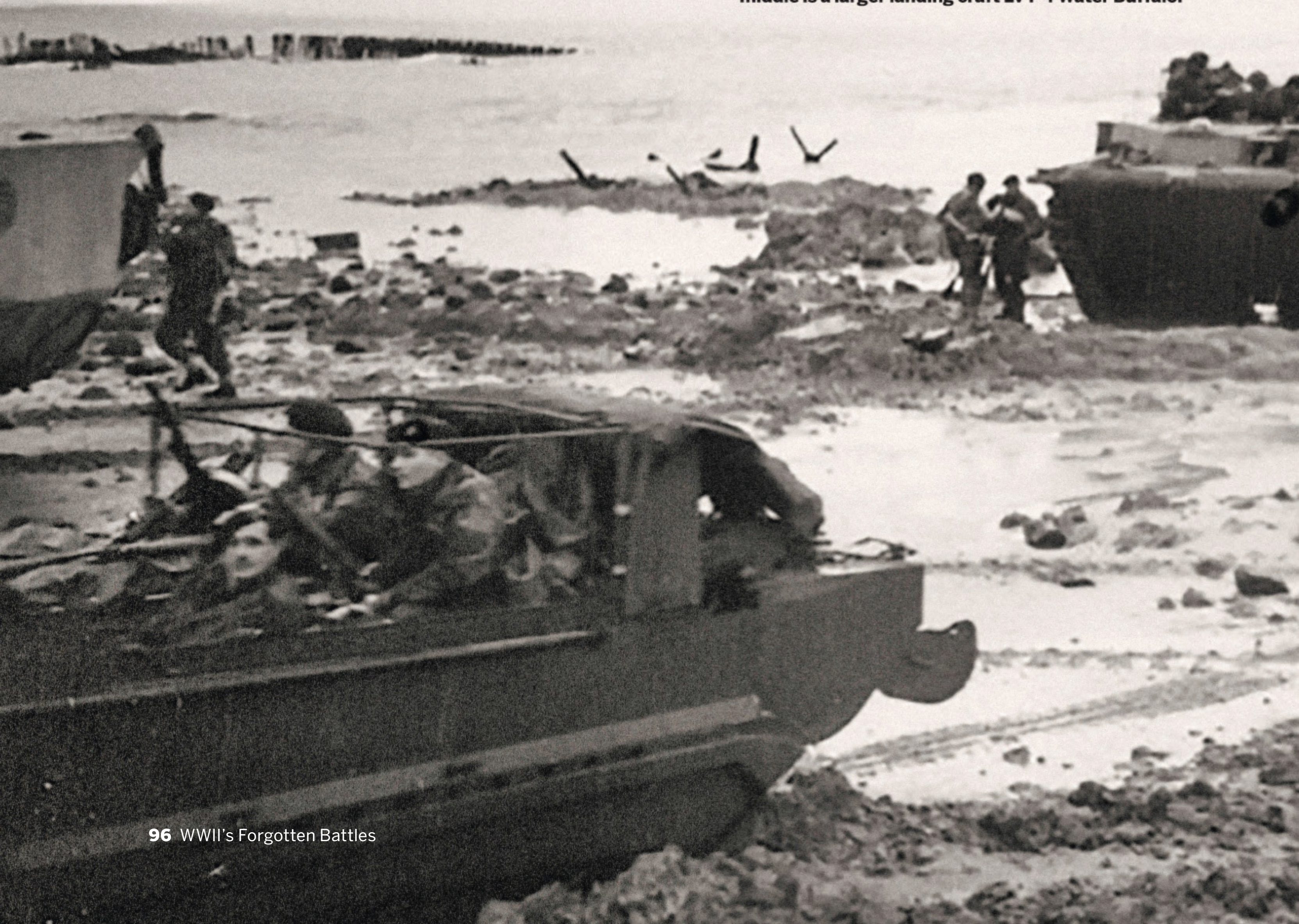
HISTORIEARKIV

AT 05.45, THE first boat bearing a reconnaissance group landed on the headland outside Vlissingen and, more by luck than skill, avoided all the stakes. Without a single shot from either side, the group in the nearest bunker surrendered. Whether it was down to verbal persuasion or the commandos' Fairbairn-Sykes knives is unknown.

A hole was cut in the barbed wire. Using white ribbons, a visible route was created for the soldiers who would follow. Help with the preparations had come from Vlissingen's police chief, who'd discreetly left the city and was now working on the Allies' side. He knew the city like the back of his hand.

But despite all the preparation, war is unpredictable. A brigade from the 52nd (Lowland)

Allied soldiers disembark at Vlissingen on Walcheren in November 1944. In the foreground are two M29C Water Weasel tracked vehicles and in the middle is a larger landing craft LVT-4 Water Buffalo.



Ships to get ashore

★ Landing ships are a larger type of landing craft, sometimes the size of a smaller cruiser. They are denoted by the letters LS, plus any follow-up letter, such as R for rocket, T for tank or similar. They may have smaller landing craft on board, which would be used for the final part of the journey on to the beach. The most famous of these is the Higgins boat, or Landing Craft Vehicle Personnel (LCVP), originally developed for Louisiana swamps. It was an 11-metre long flat-bottomed 'carton' built of plywood that could transport 36 soldiers or 12 soldiers and a jeep.

Monument on Utah Beach in Normandy with a Higgins boat.

SHUTTERSTOCK

Division had been training for mountain operations for several years. Now it received a baptism of fire. As soon as the unit made it over the 50-metre-high walls, it ended up in a huge, newly created lagoon.

In the same boat as Donkin was Lieutenant Hargreaves, who'd been with No. 4 Commando since both Lofoten and Dieppe. Now he commanded the men in the landing craft that circled off the coast, awaiting further orders. Using a signal lamp facing out to sea, Hargreaves communicated his orders and directed the men to the shore. The first hour worked well, with all six groups in No. 4 Commando moving forward. Dozens of Germans found it preferable to fall to their knees in the mud, with their hands behind their heads, than to be shot. An entire bunker of soldiers surrendered along with their ►

NATIONAL ARMY MUSEUM, LONDON

officers. A group under Lieutenant Hunter-Gray that was trained in the capture of special positions was able to attack and take it intact, including all 20 Germans. And thanks to training on handling captured enemy weapons, it was also possible to use the position's 50-mm gun in the battles.

BY 06.30, THE Germans had begun to recover from the initial confusion and were now putting up increasingly significant resistance. Donkin and McVeigh's group were trained for street fighting, something they made use of when they were ordered to secure houses along one of the city's main streets. They carried explosive charges for so-called mouse-holing, where they blew holes through the walls instead of running in and out through the doors.

After bursting into a garage, the first soldier went out through a door, where about 50 Germans were pressed up along a bunker wall. They opened fire on the door but the commando just managed to retreat back through it. Donkin, however, wasn't satisfied, and stood, legs wide, in the opening and methodically emptied his entire machine gun magazine from right to left towards the lined of Germans. However, he missed the first man in the line, who returned a shot. A bullet hit Donkin in the neck and he died on the spot.

NOW IN FULL daylight, landing craft outside the town of Westkapelle, north-east of Vlissingen, were also on their way to the beach. Operation Infatuate II followed a more traditional course, utilising 82 support vessels. Instead of taking the enemy by surprise, like Infatuate I, the operation had substantial support from 38-centimetre guns on the battleship *Warspite* and numerous guns from other ships that struck at the now-prepared enemy. The ships' guns were supported by aircraft that also attacked the invasion beach, like flying artillery.

The Allies were able to deploy the latest innovation in war technology: the LVT-4, Landing Vehicle Tracked, or Buffalo, as it was known. Originally destined for the war in the Pacific, LVT-4s were now launched from larger landing craft along with the smaller Weasel. The latter were used in

A German prisoner holding a piece of white cloth is captured by a British commando. The Germans were immediately put to work salvaging British artillery.

IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM

Civilians on Walcheren were evacuated by boat.

GEORGE RODGER/THE LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION VIA GETTY IMAGES

mountainous areas as snowmobiles. An LVT could reach 12 kilometres per hour in water and over 30 km/h on land, and carry upwards of 18 soldiers within the armoured hull.

The important thing was, of course, transporting the men, heavy weapons and LVTs in the approximately 200 participating landing craft. Before reaching the shore, several were hit and sunk, while others managed to reach shallow water but suffered heavy losses. Both larger landing craft and the LVTs were severely hit during the landing due to intense, targeted fire from the German defence.

BACK TO VLISSINGEN. All the landing craft carrying No. 4 Commando managed to reach the shore, but when day dawned, the German batteries sprang into action and started firing at the troops that followed. An LCA, Landing Craft Attack, with 26 soldiers from the King's Own Scottish Borderers was hit, and all men on board were killed. Other ships were damaged before they reached the shore, as was an LCT, Landing Craft Tank, which sank in shallow water, just off the shore. It was carrying the 52nd (Lowland) Division's mountain guns, which were crucial for providing fire support. The guns themselves could be saved by being dismantled and then taken ashore with the help of captured Germans.

"BY 11.00, THE WORST WAS OVER AND ALL PLANNED LANDINGS HAD BEEN COMPLETED"

BY 11.00, THE worst was over and all planned landings had been completed. During the morning, the cloud cover eased, which meant that Typhoon and Spitfire planes, which took off from RAF bases in Belgium, could carry out 152 missions. The whole day was marked by fierce German resistance from a range of weapons, including numerous snipers and well-aimed grenade launchers.

The capture of Vlissingen was far from a walkover for No. 4 Commando. It was not until 8th November that the German resistance on Walcheren was completely defeated, and vital transports to Antwerp could begin.

Karl Gunnar Norén is a military history writer.

Further reading: **Walcheren 1944 – Storming Hitler's Island Fortress** (2011) by Richard Brooks.

Korsun-Cherkassy 1944

IN THE RED ARMY'S GRIP

When the Red Army attacked the Korsun-Cherkassy Pocket on 24th January 1944, it succeeded in encircling nearly 60,000 German soldiers. On 2nd February, General von Manstein decided that his ill-equipped army would try to break out – a new Stalingrad had to be avoided at all costs.

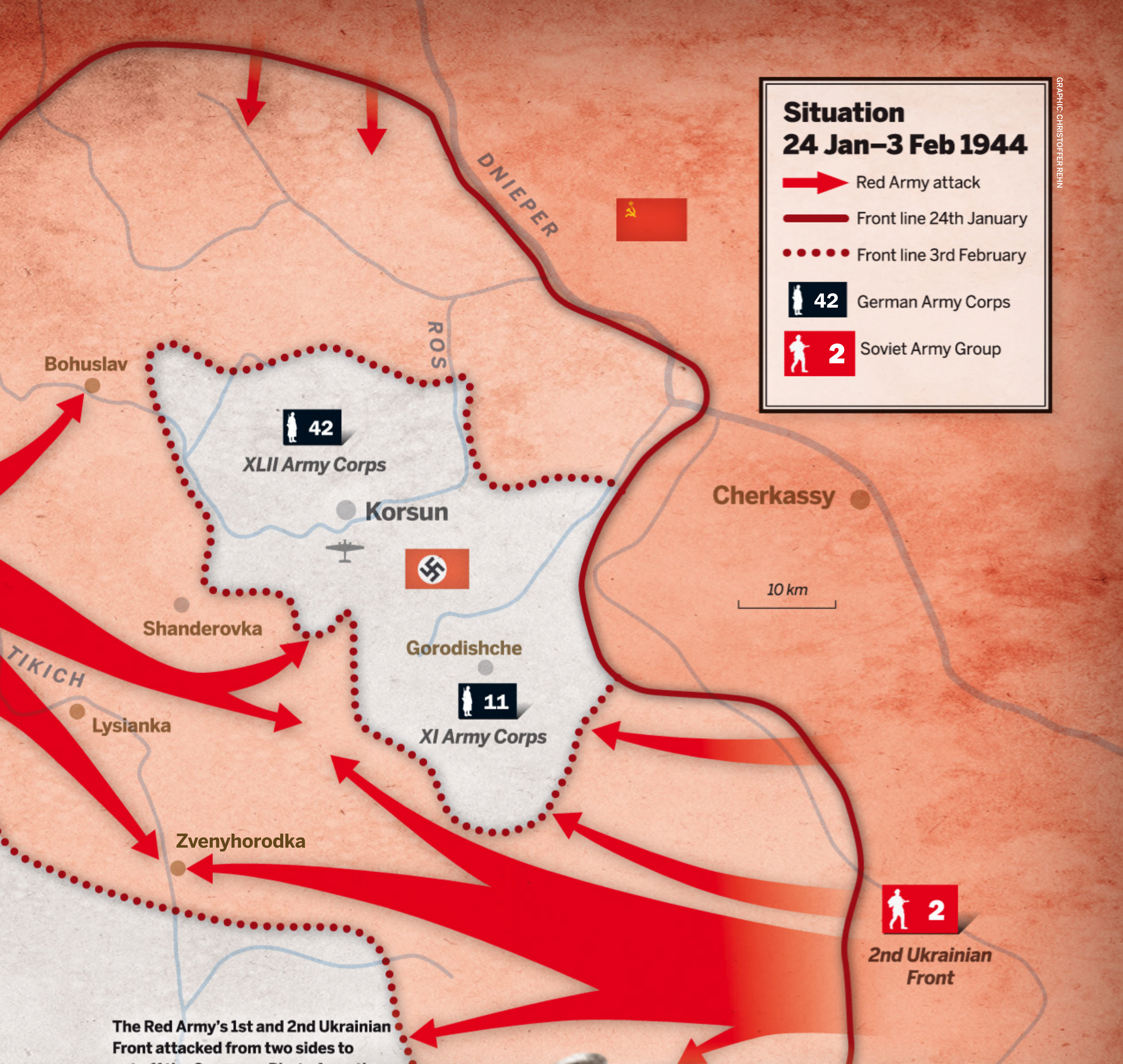
Text: **ANDERS FAGER**

1
1st Ukrainian Front
GNILO
3
III Panzer Corps

The German defence consisted mainly of weary infantrymen.

HISTORIEARKIV

> **“THE 1ST AND 2ND UKRAINIAN FRONTS WOULD ATTACK FROM THE WEST AND EAST RESPECTIVELY, AND ENCIRCLE THE GERMANS”**


Situation
24 Jan–3 Feb 1944
Red Army attack
Front line 24th January
Front line 3rd February
42 German Army Corps
2 Soviet Army Group
DNIEPER
ROS
Bohuslav
42
XLII Army Corps
Korsun
Cherkassy
10 km
Shanderovka
TIKICH
Gorodishche
11
XI Army Corps
Lysianka
Zvenyhorodka
2
2nd Ukrainian Front

GRAPHIC: CHRISTOFFER REHN

The Red Army's 1st and 2nd Ukrainian Front attacked from two sides to cut off the Germans. Photo from the Dnieper offensive in October 1943.

HISTORIEARKIV

The battle for the Korsun pocket is part of the vast, unfathomable Soviet recapture of Ukraine that was initiated in August 1943, immediately after the failed German offensive at Kursk. The first major attack on the south side of the Kursk salient began on 3rd August and Kharkiv was recaptured in a few days.

BUNDESARCHIV, 183-H01757/CC-BY-SA 3.0

Field Marshal Erich von Manstein led Army Group South, which included the German troops at Korsun-Cherkassy.

Erich von Manstein's Army Group South had already spent its attacking strength and didn't have much left to oppose the Soviet advance. On 24th August, five Soviet fronts with over 2.5 million men and 50,000 artillery pieces attacked along a 1,400-kilometre front line (that's approximately the same distance as between Edinburgh and Berlin, as the crow flies). Army Group South, which had almost half as many soldiers and more than 12,000 artillery pieces, retreated before it.

Hitler had accepted a plan to fall back and defend a line extending along the River Dnieper and into the north, but the Red Army had improved its mobile offensive capabilities and what was intended as a retreat to new defensive positions degenerated into a race, with the Soviet units snapping at the heels of the German forces as they chased them to the Dnieper. In several places, they reached the river at the same time and the Soviet units were able to cross the water and form bridgeheads. The Dnieper line was cracked before it even existed.

AFTER A BREATHER, the Red Army attacked again, in early October. This time, the target was Kiev. During two months of fierce fighting, Nikolai Vatutin's 1st Ukrainian Front recaptured Kiev in a skilful though rarely described operation. At the same time, the great industrial city of Dnipropetrovsk (now Dnipro) was captured and land routes to the Crimean peninsula were cut off. It was a huge success and triggered celebrations in the Kremlin.

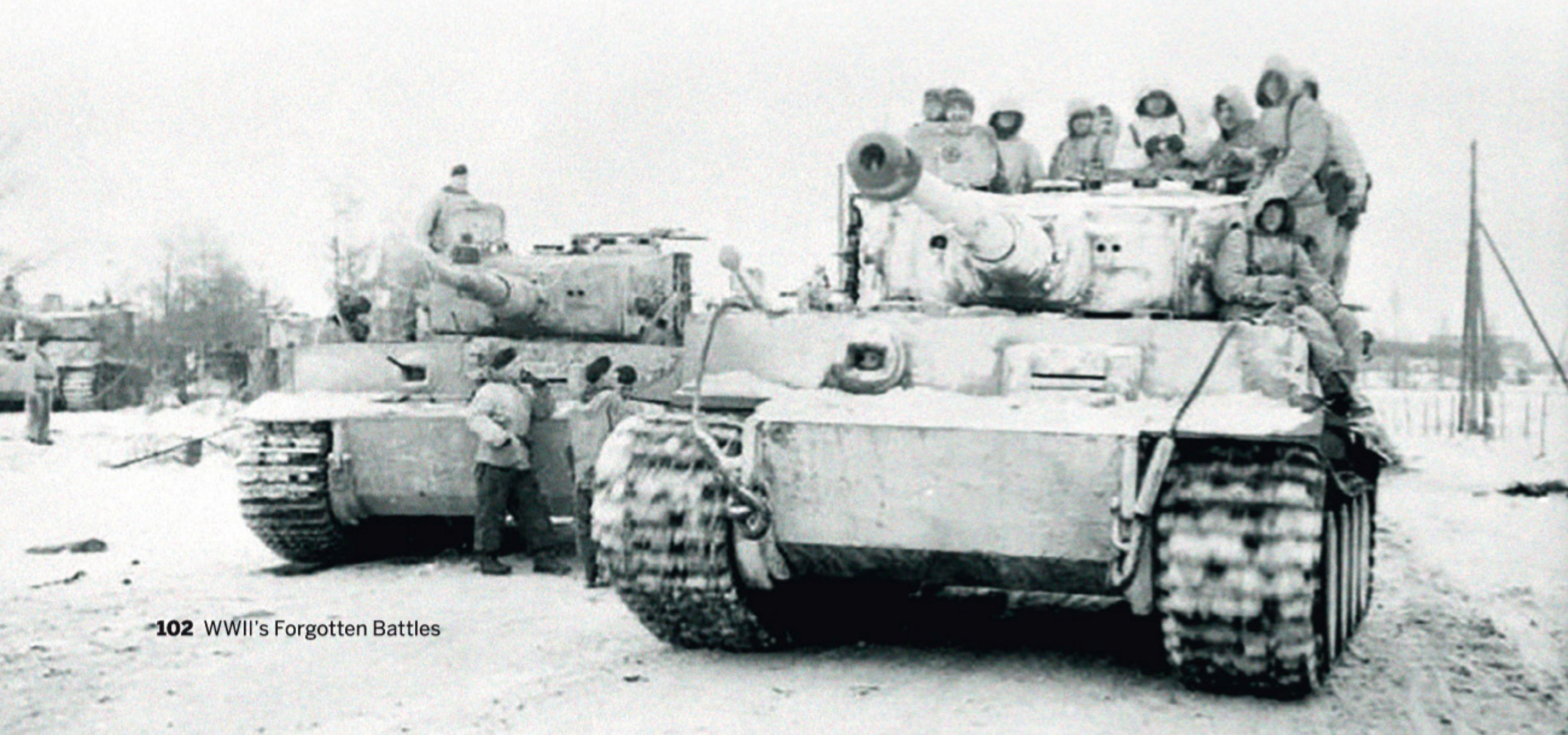
The next phase of the Soviet offensive began in the New Year, with Vatutin attacking west from Kiev. The ensuing battles reduced Army Group South to a paper-thin chain of bruised units, from the Pinsk Marshes to the Black Sea. The Germans' only remaining position on the Dnieper was a few miles east of Korsun, in a bulge between Vatutin's 1st and Ivan Konev's 2nd Ukrainian Fronts.

THE KORSUN BULGE was a product of how the fighting developed in Ukraine. Konev and Vatutin had simply ignored the entrenched Germans around Korsun and attacked in other directions. Now the German position stuck out towards the north-east like a 800-kilometre-long and 100-kilometre-wide thumb, whose tip was made up of the German forces still stubbornly defending the banks of the Dnieper.

It was the idiotic logic of the Eastern Front: despite the fact that the position at the Dnieper no longer served any purpose, it remained. Hitler clung to the idea that an offensive could be launched at a later date to take back the Dnieper as a line of defence. It was an impossible notion.

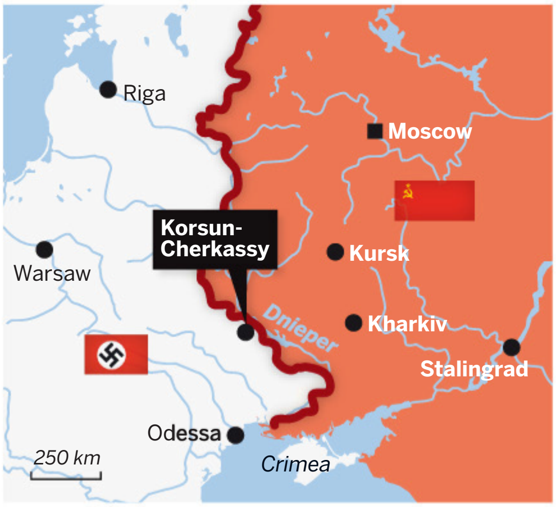
It is worth noting that all the insane German decisions during World War II were later blamed on Hitler, especially when von Manstein was involved. However, von Manstein saw no end in itself in defending useless sections of terrain and instead wanted to conduct a mobile defence that was the only tactical situation in which the Germans could still use their superior armoured units. In more static situations, the Soviet forces could leverage their superior artillery numbers.

The defence of the Korsun bulge fell to two corps, each belonging to different armies: General Theo-Helmut Lieb's XLII Army Corps defended the north



Tiger tanks from German III Panzer Corps attacked the Korsun bulge from the south to link up with the trapped troops. February 1944.

BUNDESARCHIV, BILD 101I-277-0847-11/JACOB/CC-BY-SA 3.0



CHRISTOFFER REHN

This was the front in December 1943, a month before the Red Army attacked the Korsun bulge.

SOVFOTO/UIG/GETTY

The 2nd Ukrainian Front's commander, Ivan Konev (right), and his chief of staff, Matvei Zakharov, study the map before the operation.

and west, while General Wilhelm Stemmermann's XI's Army Corps was in the east. Both were too stretched to properly defend their long fronts and XLII corps was also forced to further extend its front to the west and south as Vatutin swept around behind it. The bulge was constantly subjected to minor attacks which, although not leading to heavy losses, meant that the defenders were constantly kept on full alert. Both German generals wanted to retreat to the River Ros, which ran through Korsun and the southern part of the bulge. But their requests were denied. Despite this, plans had begun for an evacuation of the most vulnerable positions and food supplies were set up in Korsun.

MEANWHILE, MARSHAL GEORGY Zhukov, who was coordinating operations in Ukraine, began to see opportunities. It was time to squeeze the Korsun bulge. Equipped with 300,000 men, 520 tanks and 5,300 artillery pieces, the 1st and 2nd Ukrainian Fronts would attack from the west and east respectively, and encircle the Germans. They would then defeat the trapped forces, while the two spearheads blocked any attempts to break out from within or mount a rescue from without.

The biggest Soviet problem before the operation was support. The Red Army was constantly operating at its limits, at the far end of a devastated rail and road network. It was difficult even to get petrol and ammunition to the attacking units.

> **"IN MOSCOW, THEY CHEERED AND TALKED ABOUT A NEW STALINGRAD"**

The Germans had similar problems on their side. The Ukrainian road network and the weather conditions in winter 1943 – thaws, sleet and short cold snaps – made matters worse. Vehicles froze solid in thousands of traffic jams. On the other hand, both sides' air units could only operate when it was freezing, because their runways were too muddy otherwise. During the lead up to the attack, roads in General Vatutin's and Konev's areas of operation were reinforced at a furious pace. Zhukov also launched a major diversionary operation to convince the Germans that Konev would attack from the south.

HISTORIEARKIV

Marshal Georgy Zhukov commanded the Soviet troops at Korsun-Cherkassy.

ON 24TH JANUARY, Konev launched attacks from the south-east and the next day he deployed the unit that had won victory at Kursk: the 5th Guards Tank Army under the skilful command of General Pavel Rotmistrov. Shadowed by the 5th Guards Cavalry Corps, the Soviets penetrated deep, and began marching towards Zvenyhorodka.

On the 26th, Vatutin also attacked the north-west perimeter of the bulge. Vatutin had a difficult time on the field; the muddy surface prevented him using his usual tactics. At the same time, he had to deal with minor German skirmishes along his long front, but after some complicated regroupings, which tested the Soviet systems to the limit, they broke through. Once Vatutin's troops began to advance in earnest, they met little resistance. On 28th January, they reached Zvenyhorodka, and met the garrison army east of the city that evening. In Moscow, they cheered and talked about a new Stalingrad – although, in truth, they'd encircled less than a quarter of the foes they had surrounded in that city.

Inside the pocket, the German XI Corps' commander, General Stemmermann, took charge ►

A T-26 light tank with infantry during the attack at Korsun-Cherkassy. The T-26, which had been successful before WWII, was now hopelessly outdated.

RIA NOVOSTI ARCHIVE, IMAGE #606710/I. OZERSKIJ/CC-BY-SA 3.0

▶ of the encircled units. Nearly 60,000 men were captured inside a 6,000-kilometre square area. The surrounded forces consisted mainly of ragged infantry units and enfeebled artillery. The only motorised unit was the 5th SS Panzer Division "Wiking". It was reinforced with Estonian volunteers and the Belgian Walloon Legion, which was led in Korsun by Léon Degrelle, to whom Hitler had once allegedly said: "You are a political leader who fights like a soldier. If I had a son, I would want him to be like you." Despite such reinforcements, Wiking still only consisted of 30 or so tanks. It is unclear how many Russian axillary volunteers, known as "hiwis", were also in the pocket. The fact that large numbers of Russians fought for the German army is not something that is talked about in Russia even today. They never existed.

THE UKRAINIAN FRONTS were now faced with defending themselves against attempts to break out of and into the pocket. For a few days, the encircling Soviet forces were just a long string of units with a few kilometres between those facing inward and fighting forces trapped inside the pocket and those facing outwards towards the rest of the German Army. The twin fronts crept forward in snow and mud. In many places, Soviet units were held in place by muddy conditions or fuel shortages, while the Germans were slowly building new lines. But with each passing day, the Red Army's ring grew stronger, and when the first German relief attacks began on 1st February, they were met by a solid, if thin, Soviet line of defence.

"INSIDE THE POCKET, THE FRONT IN THE NORTH BEGAN TO COLLAPSE AND THE ENCIRCLED AREA SHRANK"

STEMMERMANN REQUESTED PERMISSION to pull his units south towards more easily defended terrain. Permission proved immaterial in the long term, however, as the pocket collapsed towards the south like a punctured balloon. The units in the north could no longer resist the determined Red Army. They fell back and were herded into new positions in the south, where the best units, the 5th SS Panzer Division and the 72nd Infantry Division, served as 'firefighters', repulsing Soviet attacks. But their efforts weren't enough.

As early as 29th January, the day after the Soviet's ring closed, the Luftwaffe began airlifting support to Korsun. This succeeded surprisingly well. The Soviets' air support was disorganised, which enabled the Germans to fly in almost 400 tonnes

BUNDESARCHIV, BILD 141-1280/CC-BY-SA 3.0

The airfield at Korsun in January 1944. Junkers Ju 52 transport planes flew in supplies to the encircled troops.

of fuel and over 800 tonnes of ammunition. They also evacuated more than 4,000 wounded. It was only half of what was required in the pocket, but thanks to the aerial supplies, the men didn't starve. After the airfield at Korsun fell on the 12th, supplies were dropped by parachute. And as late as the night before the breakout, the vanguard that would lead the push to escape was being bombarded by air-dropped ammunition crates.

Outside the pocket, von Manstein ordered III Panzer Corps with 200 tanks and XLVII Panzer Corps with just under 50 tanks to break the encirclement. There were divided opinions about how to rescue the trapped force. Someone proposed the idea of gathering the encircled forces to act as an anvil, against which the attacking armoured units could hammer the Soviet forces. As usual, later German accounts blame the maddest plans, like this one, on Hitler.

INSIDE THE POCKET, Stemmermann received permission to withdraw his units from the north on 2nd February. The next day, the III and XLVII Panzer Corps attacked the perimeter of the pocket. At the same time, it was decided that the forces inside the pocket should reorientate themselves to 'face south', attacking towards their would-be rescuers, becoming the anvil to their hammer.

HISTORIEARKIV

General Stemmermann took command of the trapped German troops.

The first German attempts to break through the encirclement on 8th February came to nothing. Despite heavy fighting, the XLVII Corps failed to reach its target, while the III Corps drove the 6th Tank Army backwards without breaking it. By 11th February, all German hopes were pinned on the III Corps – the XLVII Corps being too weak to attack again – and the Germans launched new attacks with the elite units of the 1st Panzer Division and 1st SS Panzer Division "Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler" in the lead. They rushed towards the River Gniloy Tikich and the village of Lysianka, which faced the south-west corner of the pocket. Vatutin ordered the Soviet 2nd and 6th Army to go on the counter-attack. It was an armoured battle in mud and neither side made much progress. In the end, the III Corps succeeded in making a bridgehead over the Gniloy Tikich, which gave the trapped forces a potential means of escape.

Inside the pocket, the front in the north began to collapse and the encircled area shrank towards the south-east. Lieb noted in his diary that "the north front is tottering". On 6th February, the troops were ordered to be ready for the breach on the 10th. More orders would follow.

The very next day, they were told that the attacks could be delayed. The relief units were stuck. On 8th February, Stemmermann began destroying important documents. The 5th SS Panzer Division and the 72nd Infantry Division were tangled in a gigantic traffic jam around the village of Gorodishche, which was shelled by Soviet artillery. Elsewhere, it was taking the infantry units an hour to cover one kilometre.

On 12th February, the German III Corps took Lysianka and met Soviet JS I tanks for the first time. The German Tiger tanks shot them to scrap. The JS I's gun was too small, a fault rectified on the later monster JS II.

Meanwhile, Zhukov sent an emissary to Stemmermann with an offer of surrender. It was refused. Next, Lieb received a letter from one of his former commanders, captured in Stalingrad, who now encouraged Lieb to "go over to the Russians". Lieb declined to answer. In the next few days, the propaganda continued. Flyers and letters from German POWs testifying to the Soviets' reasonable treatment of prisoners were dropped over the pocket. All of which convinced the Germans that their enemy had grossly overestimated the strength of their trapped forces.

AT THE SAME time, on 6th February, Konev began squeezing the pocket, inadvertently pushing the trapped Germans from the east and north-east towards Lysianka and the bridgehead over the River Gniloy Tikich. On 10th February, the Soviets reached the outskirts of Korsun. The pocket was now just over ten square kilometres. The encircled units were pressed against Gniloy Tikich. On the 14th, Stemmermann's vanguard took the village of Shanderovka and pushed further south towards their escape route. By 17th February, the Soviet corridor was only seven kilometres wide, but the German soldiers were exhausted. A sense of panic began to spread. Lieb wrote: "Nothing gets done unless our officers are constantly behind them."

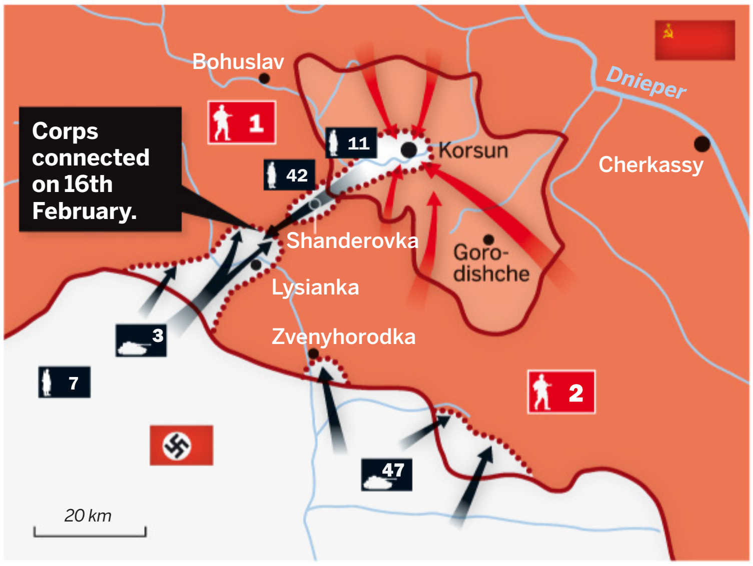
But even the Soviet attacks were slow, the mud was just as difficult for them and they suffered from a lack of support. Konev planned a final attack on the pocket on 17th February; the Germans had decided to break out the day before.

"IN THE SNOW, THEY SURPRISED AND BROKE THROUGH TWO THIN SOVIET LINES"

This map shows the lines of attack used when the Germans broke out of the Korsun bulge.

— Front 3rd Feb
••• Front 17th Feb

42 German Corps
2 Soviet Army Group



Corps connected on 16th February.

CHRISTOFFER REHN

Outside the pocket, the III Corps mounted new attacks. The corps' sledgehammer, Generalmajor Bäke's Heavy Panzer Regiment, managed to break through, but then ran out of petrol. The Soviet units also lacked supplies and only counter-attacked after receiving fuel and ammunition. Later Soviet analysis of the operation revealed that cavalry units, which didn't need fuel, were highly effective in the battles to keep the pocket closed.

On 16th February, von Manstein formally ordered the breakout. The pocket was now less than five kilometres across. Stemmermann was ordered to attack south-west with bayonets to reach Lysianka, Gniloy Tikich and III Corps. Lone artillery pieces would offer support and the few tanks that remained had to manage the best they could. Stemmermann would lead the rearguard and Lieb would head the breakout. They left 2,000 wounded and a doctor from each division in Shanderovka.

Lieb gathered his leaders and extorted them not to become rattled by upcoming events – as he explained, they would all need guardian angels for everything to go their way. The troops formed three columns and destroyed anything they wouldn't take with them. Then it was time. The password was *"Freiheit"* ("Freedom"). There were stories afterwards that the SS units dosed themselves with Benzedrine in order to be able to walk for days.

AT 23.00 ON 16th February, the attack began. It could have been a scene from the Napoleonic Wars, with columns of slow-marching infantrymen, bearing fixed bayonets, and Lieb riding in their middle. In the snow, they surprised and broke through two thin Soviet lines. The Red Army soon realised what was happening. Shanderovka came under heavy fire, buildings were set alight. The columns fought through the artillery fire, in the burning town and fields of snow. Stemmermann was killed, his car hit by an artillery shell. Soviet tanks mowed down columns of soldiers. Panic ensued. Cossacks hunted the fleeing soldiers, cutting off the hands of soldiers who were trying to surrender.

Lieb's staff rode between Soviet tanks. The Germans became an undisciplined mob, fighting their way south. One of the leaders reached III

German soldiers with horse-drawn carts heading west. Von Manstein's troops were forced to leave much equipment behind.

BUNDESARCHIV, BILD 101I-711-0438-05A/MENZENDORF/CC-BY-SA 3.0

Corps just before dawn. It was still possible to get out and reach safety.

In the afternoon, the large mass of troops reached the 15-metre-wide Gniloy Tikich. Chaos reigned. Some waded into the icy water. Others used the bridgeheads made by the III Corps. The last of Stemmermann's tanks and trucks were driven into the water to be used as a makeshift bridge. Tanks loaded with wounded were the only ones that were driven out the other side. From the heights, Tiger and Panther tanks that had run out of petrol tried to protect those fleeing. Nearly 30,000 Germans survived. Outside the pocket, the soaked, starving soldiers still had to wait to fill their bellies; the III Corps had no food. Luckily, 2,000 wounded soldiers were flown out. The rest had to head west on foot. They were no longer German units, just survivors.

THE KORSUN BATTLE was, of course, a Soviet victory, and Zhukov was happy to talk about a second Stalingrad. The Germans focussed on their successful defensive battles, which saved many lives. But nothing could change the fact that six German divisions had been beaten and lost all their equipment. The Soviet mopping-up operation continued for another month before Ukraine was finally liberated by an exhausted Red Army.

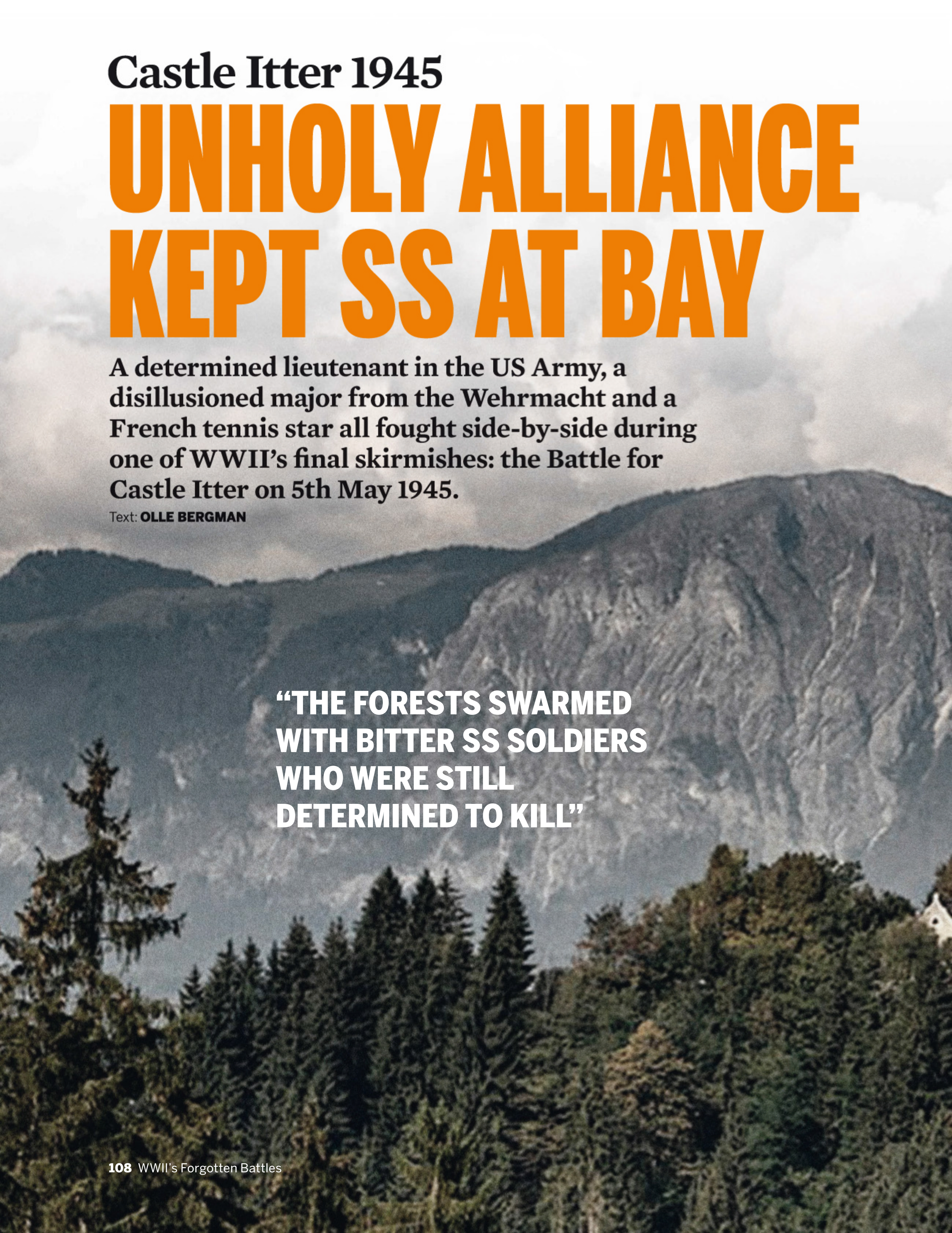
Stalin was reported to have been delighted with the massacre. Konev was promoted to marshal and would later crush the 1956 Hungarian uprising. Vatutin, who was out of favour with Stalin, was not promoted. He was fatally wounded in an ambush a few weeks later. Rotmistrov, who was perhaps the most skilled commander at Korsun, was appointed commander of all Soviet armoured troops in 1962.

THERE ARE VERY different accounts of the losses at Korsun. Many Soviet descriptions do not even mention the fact that the Germans escaped the pocket. The Soviet losses amounted to almost 30,000 dead and 50,000 wounded (more than the total number they defeated). They also lost over 700 tanks. The German losses are more controversial, with reports of between 30,000 and 55,000 dead and wounded, as well as more than 150 tanks.

The Battles of the Korsun-Cherkassy Pocket became known thanks to the 1952 US Army study *Operations of Encircled Forces*, which supplied an in-depth analysis of how the German units were encircled and escaped. It was published at a time when NATO was facing the same Red Army that had recently crushed the German war machine and could, at any moment, try to do the same to NATO. The US, therefore, was happy for any insight into its new foe, even it came from a former enemy that had served a despicable regime. ✠

Anders Fager is a reserve officer and author.

Further reading:
Operations of Encircled Forces – German Experiences in Russia (1952) by the US Army.



Castle Itter 1945

UNHOLY ALLIANCE KEPT SS AT BAY

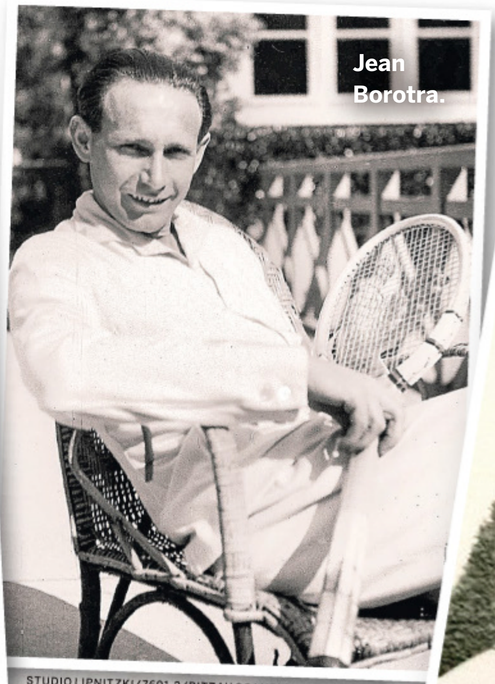
A determined lieutenant in the US Army, a disillusioned major from the Wehrmacht and a French tennis star all fought side-by-side during one of WWII's final skirmishes: the Battle for Castle Itter on 5th May 1945.

Text: **OLLE BERGMAN**

> **"THE FORESTS SWARMED WITH BITTER SS SOLDIERS WHO WERE STILL DETERMINED TO KILL"**

Josef Gangl.

HISTORIEARKIV



Jean Borotra.

STUDIO LIPNITZKI/7691-2/RITZAU SCANPIX

Jack Lee Jr.

HISTORIEARKIV

The castle was built to withstand a siege in the Middle Ages. In May 1945 it found itself under a similar attack.

HISTORIEARKIV

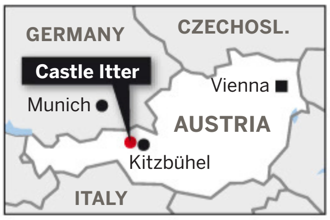
It was the morning of 4th May 1945, and US troops were in East Tyrol, five kilometres from the German border. Lieutenant Jack Lee Jr sat on the turret of his M4 Sherman tank – *Besotten Jenny* – in the small town of Kufstein as he planned how to defend the town square. After five months fighting in France and Germany, he and his men were weary and fed up of being in "Krautland" just to see out the war's final days. But the men in Company B, 23rd Tank Battalion of the US 12th Armored Division had to remain on alert. German forces who refused to surrender continued to resist in the mountainous landscape and were armed with both tanks and anti-tank guns. The forests swarmed with bitter SS soldiers who were still determined to kill – both American enemies and countrymen who they perceived to be traitors.

THIS MORNING WAS about to become almost surreal. A German *Kübelwagen* (lightly armoured vehicle) suddenly rolled towards Lee and his men with a white flag fluttering in the wind. The passenger seat housed a decorated major in the Wehrmacht, one Josef Gangl, and he presented a strange, yet coherent, story. Higher up in the mountains lay a castle full of French VIP prisoners who feared for their lives and were appealing to be rescued.

Above: Schloss Itter seen from the east, when it served as a hotel after the war. Below: The castle's entrance as seen from inside.

STEVE J. MORGAN (2)

"SOON HE WOULD PLAY THE LEAD ROLE IN WHAT WOULD BECOME KNOWN AS 'WORLD WAR II'S STRANGEST BATTLE'"



Castle Itter is located around 25 km west of Kitzbühel.

Lee didn't hesitate for a moment and contacted his superior over the radio to get permission to investigate. He took a seat in the back of the German vehicle for a reconnaissance trip. Soon he would play the lead role in what would become known as "World War II's strangest battle".

CASTLE ITTER HAS medieval roots and is located on a hill near the ski resort of Kitzbühel. At the beginning of 1943 it was converted into a special prison for VIP prisoners, called *Ehrenhäftlinge* (detainees of honour). These were politicians and military leaders who were treated decently and lived quite comfortably in anticipation of an eventual negotiated release – or swift execution. Administratively, Castle Itter belonged to the Dachau concentration camp outside Munich, over one hundred kilometres away to the north.

By the end of the war, the prisoners in Castle Itter comprised a mixture of France's social elite, including former Prime Ministers Edouard Daladier and Paul Reynaud, and military commanders Maurice Gamelin and Maxime Weygand. The most colourful character was Jean Borotra, a former world-class tennis player and a well-known sportsman in his homeland. The prisoners were looked after by a small number of ordinary prisoners of war. The prison garrison, comprising personnel from the notorious 3rd SS Panzer Division "Totenkopf", was commanded by Hauptsturmführer Sebastian Wimmer.

ON 3RD MAY, Wimmer dispatched one of the prisoners, Yugoslav Zvonimir Čučković, on an errand. What he didn't realise was that Čučković carried a secret letter, written in English, with a plea for help. The French prisoners had an overview of the military situation and feared that they would be killed in the chaos of the war's final days.

After cycling to Innsbruck, sixty kilometres further west, Čučković passed on the message to a US unit. A rescue force was being prepared, ►

US forces with a M4 Sherman tank approach the castle on 5th May 1945.

ERIC SCHWAB/AFP/RITZAU SCANPIX

but it had run into trouble and the relief mission was delayed.

The alcoholic Wimmer became increasingly nervous, not least because a few days earlier the commander at Dachau, Eduard Weiter, had turned up drunk at Castle Itter before shooting himself. On 4th May, Wimmer left his post, and shortly after, the guards also abandoned the prison.

THE PRISONERS STILL feared for their lives and planned a desperate defence of the castle. They broke into the weapon store and found small arms and ammunition. In the town of Itter, they contacted a German soldier whom they trusted: Hauptsturmführer Kurt-Siegfried Schrader, who'd been exempted from service because of an injury. He agreed to lead the castle's defenders.

Now another prisoner departed, the Czech chef Andreas Krobot. He rode to the city of Wörgl on the morning of 4th May with a letter in English. The city was swarming with Waffen-SS soldiers, but he luckily stumbled upon an Australian resistance fighter in a side street. Krobot was quickly taken to their leader, Wehrmacht Major Josef Gangl, who had switched sides and now tried to protect the civilian population from abuses. Gangl decided to act, got into a Kübelwagen and drove to the Americans in nearby Kufstein, where he encountered Lieutenant Lee.

HISTORIEARKIV

The SS "Totenkopf" Division's primary role was to monitor concentration camps.

After Gangl and Lee had visited the castle and met the French, they promised to return. Initially they hoped to be able to muster a large group of soldiers, but due to tactical decisions and some issues encountered on the road, it shrunk to practically nothing. When the force eventually reached the castle in the afternoon, it comprised Lieutenant Lee's M4 Sherman and crew, a handful of infantry from the US's 142nd Infantry Regiment and a dozen or so German soldiers, including Gangl.

At the castle, the prisoners informed them that German soldiers had moved into the surrounding area and that they'd brought anti-tank guns. Lee, Gangl and Schrader then started organising a hasty defence and placed the Sherman in the middle of the castle entrance.

THE SS SOLDIERS were clearly prepared for a fierce battle to enter the castle. In the early hours of 5th May, they began to test the defences through advanced patrols and gunfire. After dawn broke the defenders received a setback when a young German soldier in the defence force left the castle to switch sides. Now it was impossible to hide the fact the defensive force was only a small one.

Shortly afterwards, the situation worsened further when the defenders discovered that a larger enemy force had arrived in transport vehicles. They were evidently from the 17th SS Panzer-Grenadier Division. Soon the area around the castle had filled with Waffen-SS soldiers with their characteristic camouflaged uniforms – a total of around 100-150 men, complete with two anti-aircraft guns – one 20 mm, the other 88 mm.

"THE FIGHTING BECAME FIERCE AS THE ANTI-AIRCRAFT GUN FIRED EXPLOSIVE GRENADES AGAINST THE CASTLE WALLS"

In the morning, the Waffen-SS soldiers began to shell the castle with increasing intensity as they closed in from different directions. In the middle of the chaos, however, the defenders discovered they still had a working phone line. Through this, Gangl managed to call down to the Wörgl and pick up another three defenders from the city, who were able to reach the castle without being stopped.

The fighting became increasingly fierce as the anti-aircraft gun fired explosive grenades against the castle walls and Lee's Sherman tank *Besotten Jenny* was destroyed by the smaller gun. The defenders returned fire, but they had little ammunition. Five of the French prisoners participated in the fighting, despite being ordered to stay in the basement by the commanders. Gangl was killed while trying to escort the 67-year-old former Prime Minister Reynaud out of danger by what would later be confirmed to be a sniper's bullet to the head.

As Lee processed the loss, the phone suddenly rang again. Thanks to Austrian resistance fighters, Major John Kramers of the US 103rd Infantry Division – travelling to Innsbruck to recover the prisoners – had managed to make contact. Lee immediately responded: "They're shelling the bajabers out of us. Listen, better get some doughs [GIs] up here right away." Then an explosion was heard and the line went dead.

KRAMERS, DESPITE BEING outside his division's sphere of influence, helped put together a rescue force. At the same time, back at the castle Lee received a suggestion from Jean Borotra. During his internment at the castle, the adventurous tennis star had completed a couple of half-successful escape attempts, and said he was willing to run through the

German lines and brief the rescuers with a situation report. No sooner said than done: Borotra disguised himself as an Austrian farmer, jumped down from the wall, trudged cautiously past a German machine gun post and started down into the valley. One of the officers in the rescue force – a sport journalist – couldn't believe his eyes when a French tennis legend suddenly appeared in the middle of enemy territory jogging at a steady pace towards them.

The relief force appeared at the castle just in time. A Waffen-SS soldier was about to blow up the gate using a Panzerfaust and the defenders' ammunition was almost exhausted as they had retreated to the inner keep to fight one last battle.

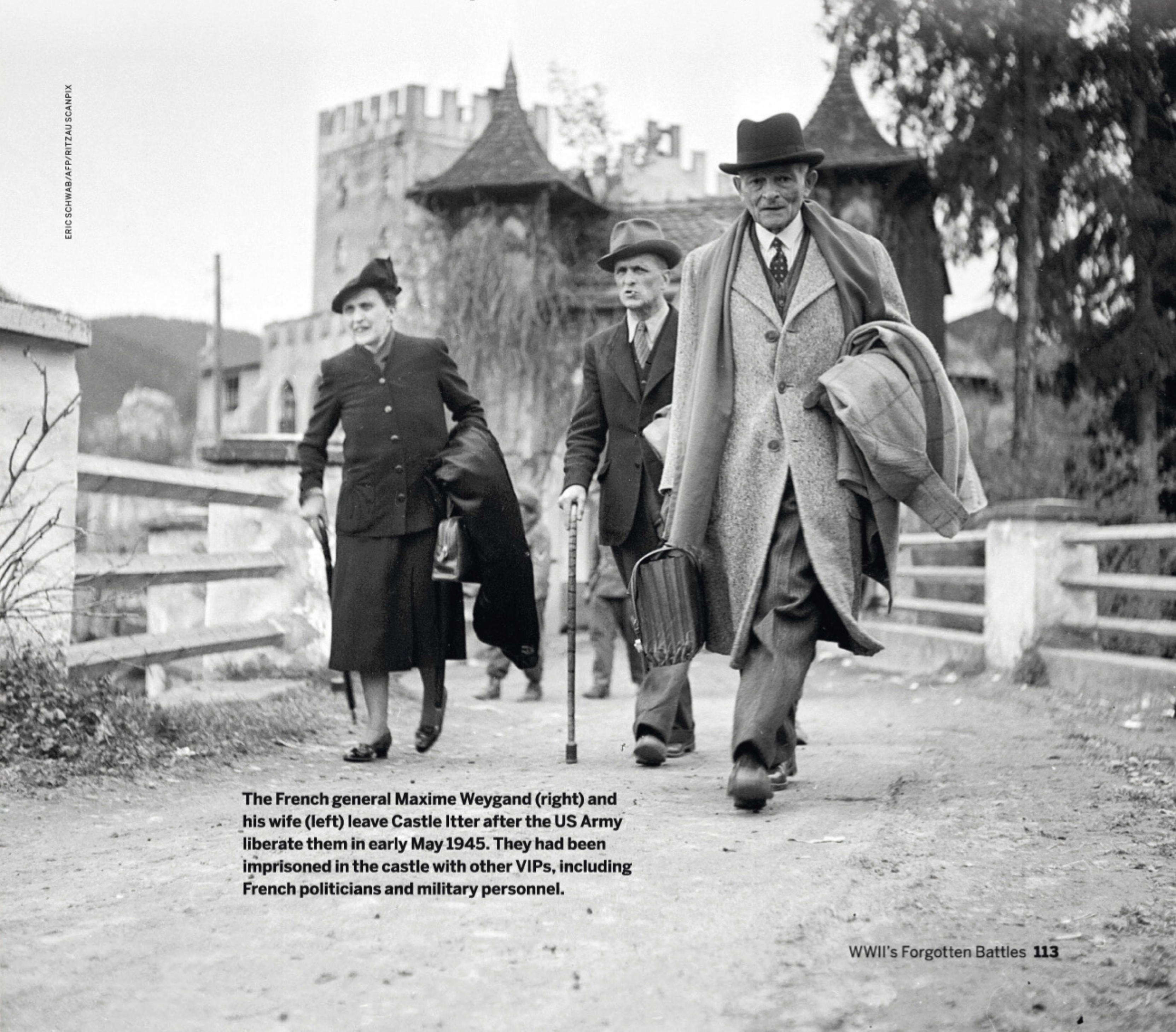
However, the sight of US tanks and troop vehicles caused the Waffen-SS soldiers to beat a hasty retreat into the surrounding terrain. In the space of a minute, the castle's hopeless situation had been transformed into one of relief and cheering. The rescue force also included one of the tanks from Lee's own Company B. On seeing his comrades, Lee jokingly remarked "What kept you?"

WHAT ORDERS THE Waffen-SS soldiers had been given, or how they'd interpreted the situation, nobody now knows; it's assumed that they had been ordered to execute the prisoners.

Two days later, Germany's unconditional surrender came into effect. Lieutenant Jack Lee Jr received the Distinguished Service Cross for his efforts. Josef Gangl was honoured with a street in Wörgl, eight kilometres from where he died.

Olle Bergman is a freelance journalist.

Further reading: **The Last Battle** (2013) by Stephen Harding.


ERIC SCHWAB/AFP/RITZAU SCANPIX

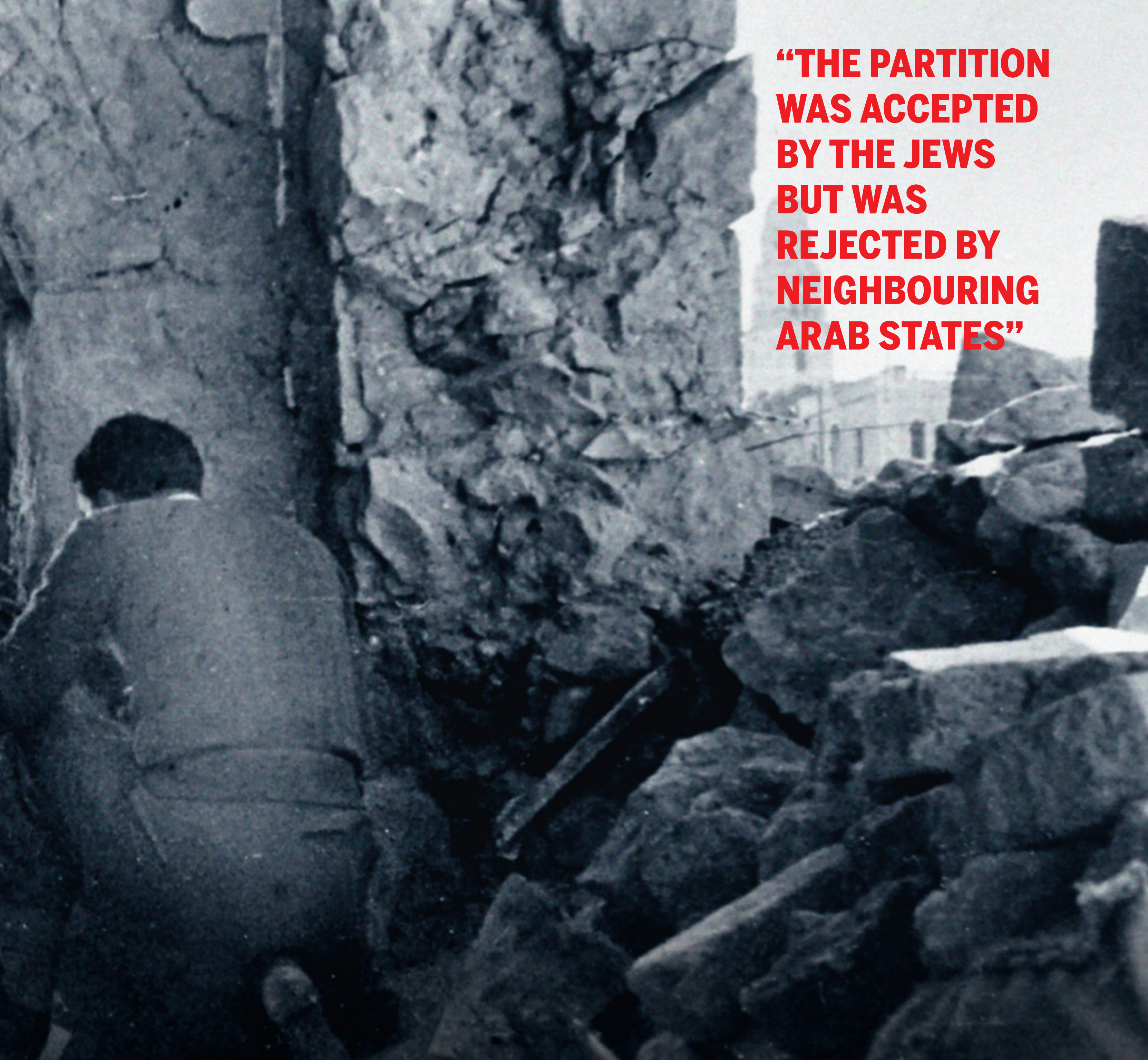
The French general Maxime Weygand (right) and his wife (left) leave Castle Itter after the US Army liberate them in early May 1945. They had been imprisoned in the castle with other VIPs, including French politicians and military personnel.

Israeli Haganah fighters take shelter behind demolished walls in Jerusalem's Old City during the 1948 battles.

DAVID RUBINGER/THE LIFE IMAGES COLLECTION/GETTY

Battle for Jerusalem

City was split between Israelis and Arabs



“THE PARTITION WAS ACCEPTED BY THE JEWS BUT WAS REJECTED BY NEIGHBOURING ARAB STATES”

As soon as the state of Israel was formed in 1948, its armed forces, the Haganah, were pitted against Arab soldiers from neighbouring countries in a battle for the holy city.

Text: **ARTUR SZULC**

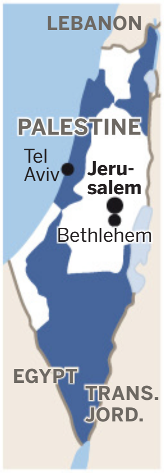
On 29th November 1947, the UN General Assembly voted narrowly in favour of a plan to partition the British mandate for Palestine into an Arab and a Jewish state. The city of Jerusalem would be under international UN stewardship.

The partition plan was accepted by the Jews but rejected by neighbouring Arab states who considered it unfair. The Arabs were in the majority and owned more land in the mandate. Their leaders also viewed the partition plan as a loss of prestige.

At the time of the vote, around 100,000 Jews lived within the proposed international zone, which included Bethlehem. The Jewish population was mainly concentrated in West Jerusalem, which was outside the walls, and there was also a Jewish quarter in the Old City. The number of Arab Muslims ►

Arab warriors set a lorry on fire after attacking it on the road to Jerusalem. Photo from 1948.

UNIVERSAL HISTORY ARCHIVE/UIG/GETTY



UN partition proposal 1947:
🟦 Jewish part
☐ Arab part
Jerusalem would be an international zone.

▶ and Christians in the zone amounted to around 60,000, but the Muslim population dominated the surrounding countryside. This was a factor that affected the situation inside Jerusalem and marked the coming clashes.

RIOTS BROKE OUT in Jerusalem immediately after the result of the UN vote was announced. In the western parts of the city, violent demonstrations took place that ended in Jewish-owned shops being looted and vandalised. The spiral of violence was underway. Both the Arab militia and two radical armed Jewish groups, Irgun and Lehi, carried out attacks and bombings in densely populated areas. Both sides' terrorist attacks were directed at busy locations, such as buses, cafés and public places. In December 1947 and January 1948, the attacks killed around one thousand people and wounded twice as many.

The British forces remained largely passive but sometimes chose to support one side or the other. Overall, they mostly focused on preparing for their evacuation and the handover of the city to the UN.

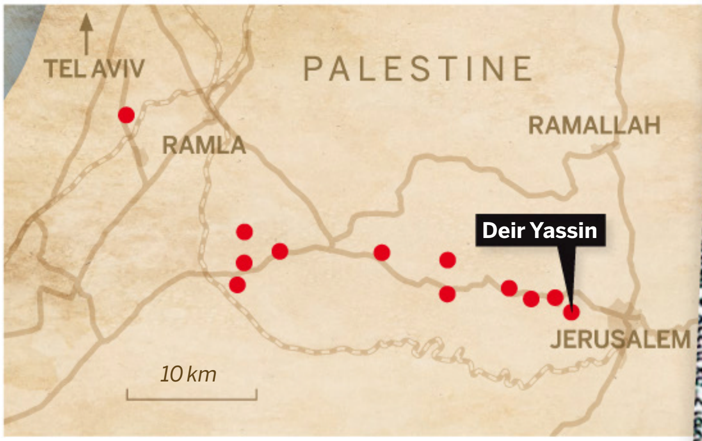
In parallel with escalating terrorist attacks, the conflict also assumed a conventional military character. Arab militias sought to disrupt and prevent the implementation of the partition plan, while Jewish forces focused on protecting Jewish settlements and eventually on expanding the territory allotted to a prospective Jewish state in the UN plan.

In military terms, the Jews had an advantage: their paramilitary force, the Haganah, was better organised, better led, and eventually had better weapons than the Arab militia and other Muslim irregular units. But Haganah's opponents had other advantages. They operated in terrain where the Arab population was in the majority and Arab villages served as bases from which rapid raids on Jewish transports could emanate.

In and around Jerusalem, Arab nationalist leader Mohammed Amin al-Husseini had no more than one thousand irregular combatants.

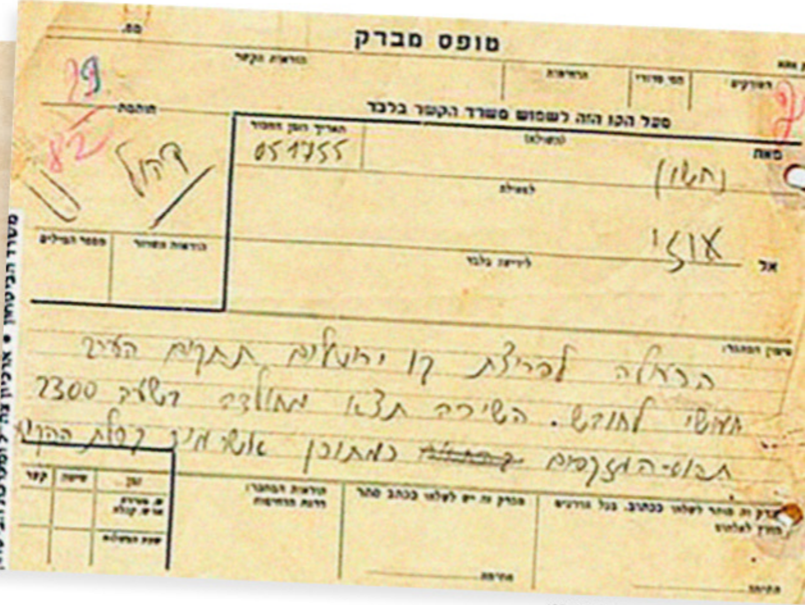
AS EARLY AS December 1947, the Haganah, under the command of David Shaltiel, was able to deploy 500 equipped and trained soldiers to defend West Jerusalem. And the number rose as more were recruited from the urban population.

Al-Husseini understood early on that he would not be able to capture West Jerusalem with his forces. However, his militia was able to block access roads and attack Jewish convoys between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. This tactic, which began



CHRISTOFFER REHN

Above: Dots show the villages Haganah took during Operation Nachshon. Right: Telegram confirming the op was underway.


טופס מברק

מאת נחשון

אל אוזי

051755

ISRAEL DEFENCE FORCE

to be applied in early 1948, had the desired effect. From March onwards, few lorries arrived in West Jerusalem. At the end of the month, Haganah suffered a heavy loss when one of its convoys was unable to fend off an Arab attack and was captured. After negotiations, the British were allowed to escort out the captured Jewish soldiers, but all their armoured and custom-made vehicles were lost. When Arab militia also sabotaged the water mains, the Jewish district in Jerusalem was cut off from all supplies and strict rationing had to be introduced as a result. A Jewish woman wrote in a letter to her adult children outside the city:

Anyone who did not care about hoarding food has nothing to eat because the shops are empty and the ration is a quarter loaf and some white cheese for the children. No milk has arrived in two weeks but we have milk powder and condensed milk. From tomorrow we drink tea and the last two cartons of milk powder we save for even worse times.

HAGANAH'S COUNTER-ATTACK WAS named Operation Nachshon and began on the evening of 5th April 1948, with 1,500 soldiers from two brigades. The main goal of the operation, which was the first major Jewish offensive to date, was to break the blockade and take control of more territory. The road from Tel Aviv to West Jerusalem was to be secured by either capturing or demolishing the Arab villages where the Arab militia and irregular forces gathered to prepare for their convoy attacks. By the time the operation ended on 20th April, several convoys with supplies and reinforcements had reached Jerusalem, but Haganah's success was only temporary: the Arab militia soon resumed their blockade. The worst blow for the Arabs was that al-Husseini fell in battle, which eroded the population's will to resist.

"THE VILLAGE'S PROTECTION FORCE ... WAS DEFEATED AND AT LEAST ONE HUNDRED VILLAGERS WERE MURDERED"

Mohammed Amin al-Husseini (1907–48) led the resistance against the Israelis.

Operation Nachshon drove out the Arab villagers. They either fled voluntarily or were forced to leave. On 9th April, units from Irgun and Lehi attacked the village of Deir Yassin located west of Jerusalem. The village's protection force and other resisters were defeated, and at least one hundred villagers were murdered. Abuses had taken place, but their scope was magnified in Arab propaganda. The Jewish leadership condemned the attack but also used it in its own propaganda as a warning to the Arab population of what could happen if they didn't yield.

Deir Yassin instilled fear in the Arab population and many chose to leave their homes, which in turn were taken over by Jews fleeing Arab-controlled areas or districts in Jerusalem.

MEANWHILE, THE FIGHTING escalated inside the city. Haganah's city forces had been expanded when the blockade had been temporarily broken during Nachshon, and the Jewish leadership now saw an opportunity to rescue the Jewish enclave in the Old City. Ultimately, they hoped to gain control of all of Jerusalem.

From the end of April until the Israeli declaration of independence on 14th May, Jewish forces carried ►

out several operations in the city. First, the Katamon district was attacked, which was located on a hill and therefore strategically important. The offensive was preceded by a long period of artillery fire, and on 30th April, Jewish ground troops were deployed. It took them three days to capture Katamon. After a pause to recover, Jewish units swept toward the Baka district, south-east of Katamon. Baka was taken more or less without resistance on 16th May. The capture of these areas caused the Arab residents to flee and many Arab homes were looted. What was formerly a somewhat ethnically and religiously mixed city was now divided into two fairly homogeneous halves, west and east. Around 750 Christian Arabs and Greeks chose to remain in the Jewish-dominated west

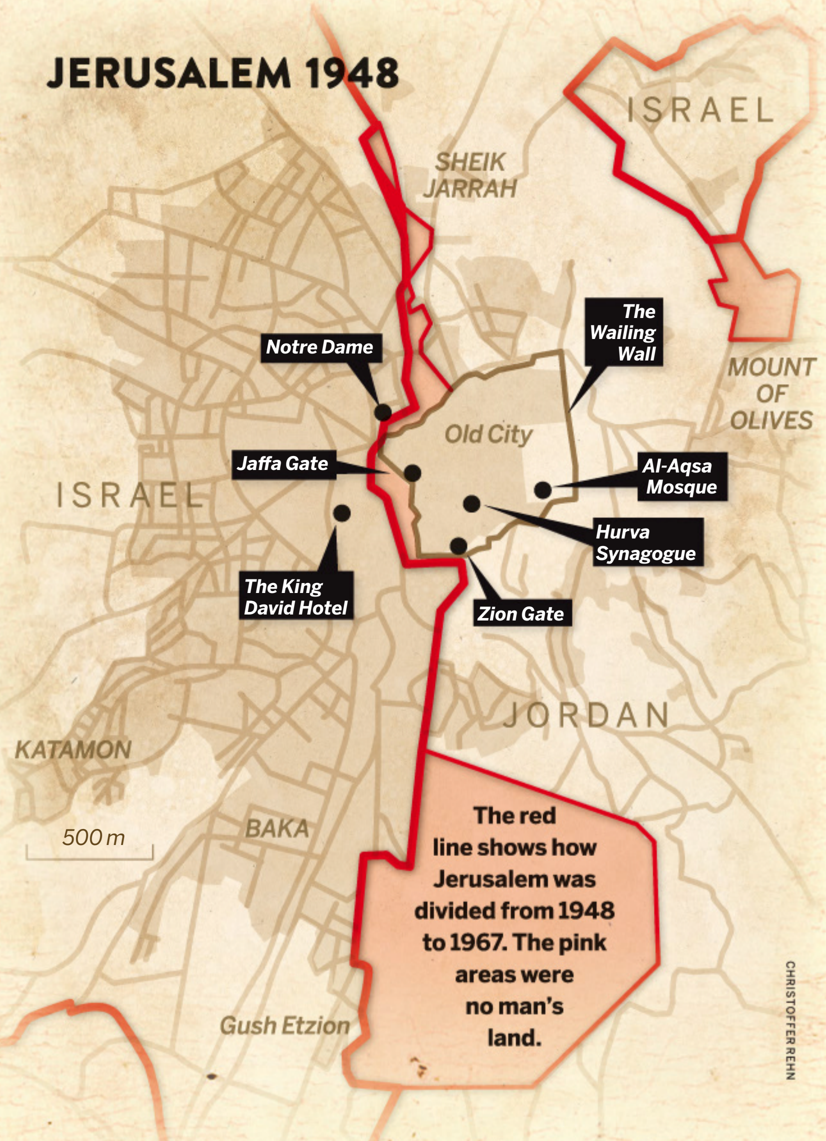
JEWISH UNITS CONTINUED the offensive and pressed against the Old City. Between 14th and 18th May, several old British outposts such as the Post Office, the King David Hotel and Central Station were captured. The attackers knew that Arab resistance would harden at the walls of the Old City, but while Arab irregular forces improved their tactical position by securing central locations next to the Jewish enclave, they still feared that the Old City would fall into Jewish hands. In the meantime, they continued to fire on the enclave with various weapons, including grenade launchers.

On 17th May, Jewish forces attacked two gates in the walls: Jaffa and Zion. They broke through the Palestinian-Arab defence at the Gate of Zion and managed to get a small unit from Palmach to the Old City before the main attack force withdrew.

The arrival of additional soldiers instilled courage in the defenders of the Jewish enclave. “The joy and enthusiasm were boundless,” Malka Natanson, an Irgun soldier, recalled afterwards. “At last, the longed-for reinforcements had arrived. Dozens of young men were coming in through Zion Gate with crates of ammunition on their shoulders.” However, the arrival of the Palmach troops did not live up to the besieged soldiers’ hopes. The civilians and wounded still couldn’t be evacuated, and there was no chance of carrying out more attacks on the gate.

The Jewish advance convinced the Arab militia leaders that they wouldn’t be able to hold their lines for much longer without help. An urgent request was made to Transjordan’s ruler, King Abdullah, to send in regular troops from the Arab Legion. The message was desperate: “The Jews are at the gates! In a few minutes Jerusalem will be theirs!”

Units from the Legion, in which many British officers served, had intervened in the Arab-Israeli civil war before 14th May, but they had not been permitted to enter Jerusalem. For example, they had attacked the settlement of Gush Etzion, south of the



The red line shows how Jerusalem was divided from 1948 to 1967. The pink areas were no man’s land.

CHRISTOFFER REHN

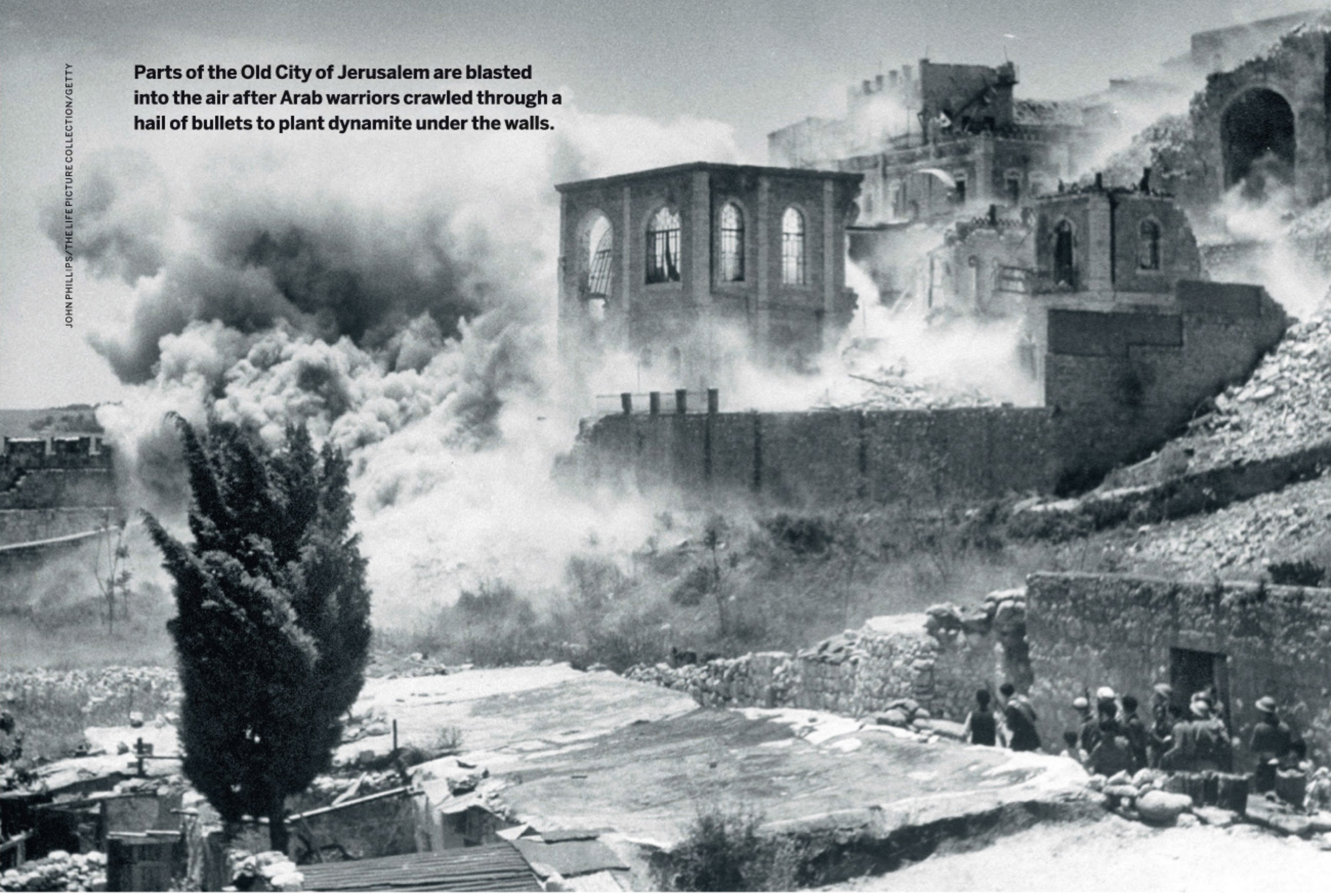
Barbed wire split east from west

★ For 19 years following Israel’s declaration of independence on 14th May 1948, Jerusalem was a divided city, separated by watchtowers, walls and barbed wire. The western part was controlled by Israel, which proclaimed Jerusalem its capital, while the eastern part, was controlled by the Kingdom of Jordan. Both sides would violate agreements, including the rights of refugees to return to their homes.

It was a severe blow to Israel that East Jerusalem came under Jordanian control. The east side of the city along with the West Bank was annexed by Jordan in 1950. Two Jewish villages outside the city limits were razed to the ground, and inside East Jerusalem, synagogues and other Jewish buildings were destroyed. Jews were not permitted to visit holy sites on the east side, such as the Jewish cemetery on the Mount of Olives or the western wall on Temple Mount. Christian religion was also restricted.

The Jordanian occupation was also a disappointment to the Palestinians, who had hoped for independence. Their protests were crushed by Jordanian police.

East Jerusalem was economically and socially neglected, with the result that many chose to leave. It was not until the 1960s that the situation improved somewhat thanks to the tourism industry.



JOHN PHILLIPS/THE LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION/GETTY

Parts of the Old City of Jerusalem are blasted into the air after Arab warriors crawled through a hail of bullets to plant dynamite under the walls.

city, on 13th May and killed both combatants and outlaws, as well as Jewish civilians. The settlement was demolished, as were several others.

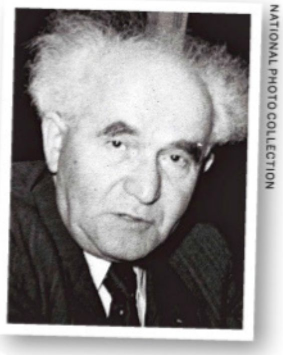
On 16th May, the king turned to the commander of the Legion, General John Glubb, and told him to enter the city with part of his force. Glubb was initially reluctant because he feared that the Legion would be involved in costly street battles, but when the king insisted, there was nothing left to do but obey orders.

ON 19TH MAY, close to 600 well-trained Arab Legion soldiers, accompanied by artillery, entered the city, markedly changing the tactical situation. Fierce battles now broke out at the walls of the Old City and on the access roads, both north and south of Jerusalem. The Legion captured the Sheik Jarrah district on 19th May, and two days later attacked the Notre Dame Catholic complex, which had been occupied by Jewish forces because of its strategic location opposite the New Gate. This led to US protests, which in turn pressured the British into making a guarantee that the Legion would not take part in any more offensive action. It was a promise the British only managed to fulfil to a certain extent. The Legion's units continued to carry out attacks on Jewish enclaves and settlements east and south of the city, but were ordered to cease hostilities each time by their British superiors. Most of the time they obeyed, but reluctantly.

Nevertheless, Arab control of East Jerusalem was secured and the Jewish force in the Old City – now barely numbering 210 Haganah and Irgun fighters – faced an overwhelming opponent. In the last week of May, the Jewish positions came under intense artillery fire, and holding the isolated enclave was considered hopeless. Jewish defenders no longer had to deal solely with irregular Arab militia, they were now up against an entire regiment from the Legion.

Desperation rose both outside and inside the enclave. David Ben-Gurion, who as the chairman of the Jewish National Council had authority over Haganah, demanded that the forces attack "at all costs". On 25th May, the commander in Jerusalem, ►

"CLOSE TO 600 WELL-TRAINED ARAB LEGION SOLDIERS, ACCOMPANIED BY ARTILLERY, ENTERED THE CITY"



NATIONAL PHOTO COLLECTION

David Ben-Gurion (1886–1973) chaired the Jewish National Council and became Israel's first PM.

David Shaltiel, and his troops did what they could, but their attempts to force the Zion Gate, whose defence included armoured vehicles from the Legion, failed. Inside the enclave, the situation was desperate. A Jewish soldier, Shimon Benshemesh, remembered: "They shelled us from the Mount of Olives. There was no way to escape. Day after day, we had more casualties. The underground hospital was filled with more and more wounded."

On 27th May, the remaining Jewish soldiers were called to the Hurva Synagogue. The next morning was "really bad" according to Yoseph Atieh. "It was clear we couldn't hold out. They closed in on us slowly ... conquering one post after another. We were out of ammunition. I had about thirty rounds left. That's all."

THAT DAY, ATIEH and his comrades laid down their weapons. Thirty-nine of their brothers-in-arms had fallen and 134 were wounded. The Arabs captured 1,500 Jewish civilian and soldiers. All were properly treated by the Legion's troops and the civilians were protected from a vengeful Arab populace. Soldiers from the Legion escorted the civilians out of the Old City via the Gate of Zion. Around 290 younger men, including the remaining soldiers and a dozen wounded, ended up in captivity. The Hurva Synagogue was blown up and the Jewish quarter was looted.

Strengthened by the success, the Legion's local commander, Major Abdullah El Tell, wanted to continue the offensive to the west, but his British superior, General Glubb, rejected the idea. Instead, British officers were withdrawn from the Arab Legion and Britain imposed an arms embargo on the Middle East.

On the Jewish side, the continued supply blockade created tension among the civilian

"NOT UNTIL THE SIX-DAY WAR IN 1967 DID ISRAELI FORCES SUCCEED IN CAPTURING EAST JERUSALEM"

A modern reconstruction shows how the Israeli Palmach soldiers attacked St Simon's Monastery in Katamon, Jerusalem, in April 1948.

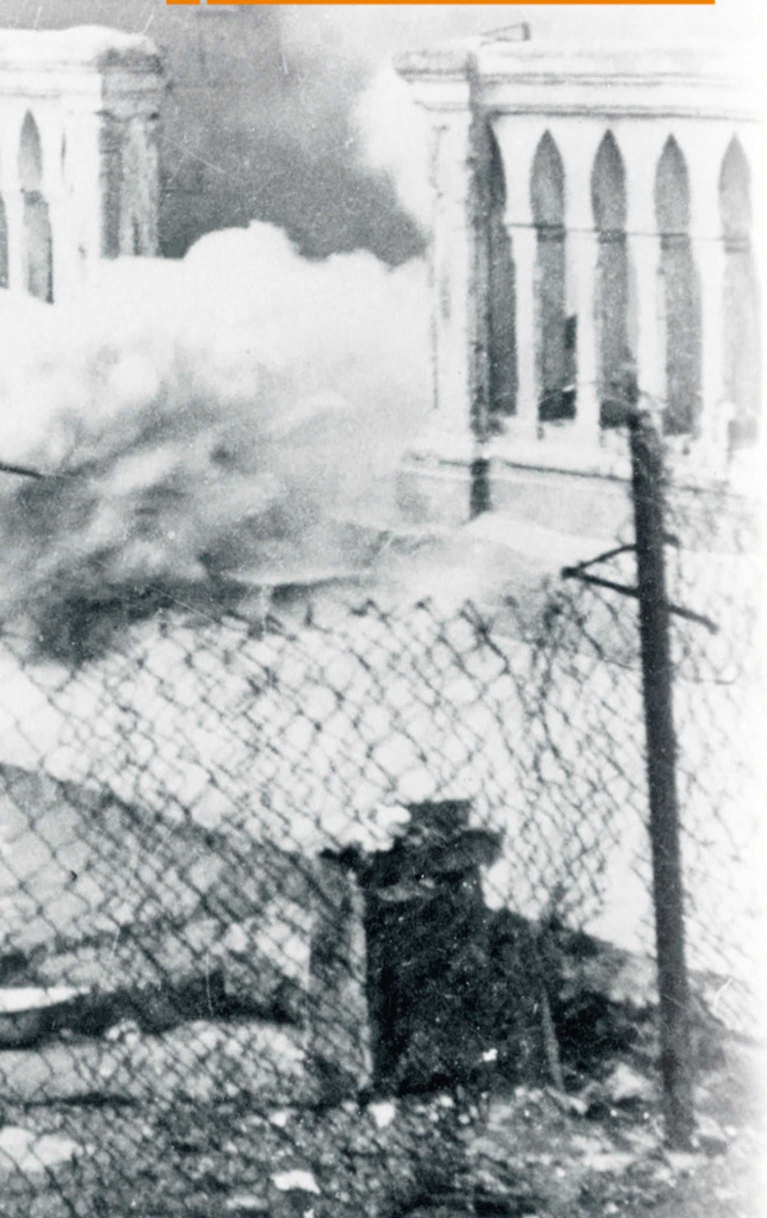
THE PALMACH ARCHIVE

population and the fighters. Following pressure from London and Washington, the two sides agreed to talks and mediator Folke Bernadotte managed to win a 30-day ceasefire starting on 11th June. Haganah used the time to bring in reinforcements and supplies, and consolidate its positions. On the eastern side, Transjordan cemented its power and El Tell was appointed military governor.

WHEN THE CEASEFIRE ended, new fighting – mostly artillery exchanges – broke out. Israeli attempts to occupy the Old City and the shrines that were central to the Jewish faith failed. On 17th July, a new and more permanent stand-off in Jerusalem was negotiated. Haganah, which became Israel's regular military force, devoted its resources to fighting the Arabs in other parts of what would eventually become the state's territory. Not until the Six-Day War in 1967 did Israeli forces succeed in capturing East Jerusalem.

Artur Szulc is a military history writer.

Further reading: 1948 – The First Arab-Israeli War (2008) by Benny Morris.



A Haganah soldier acts as an escort for a delivery of oranges in October 1938.

NATIONAL PHOTO COLLECTION

Haganah would protect the Jews in Palestine

★ The forerunner of today's Israeli military was the Haganah, which translates as "Defence". Haganah arose in 1921 after Arab uprisings in places such as Jerusalem. The Jewish leadership understood that the British authorities would not protect the Jewish population, either inside cities or in rural communities.

Initially, Haganah consisted mainly of farmers and rural residents who wanted to defend their homes. They were poorly armed and lacked a cohesive command structure.

With the widespread Arab uprising eight years later, the Haganah was transformed. The number of members increased markedly and they received better military training. Weapons were bought from abroad or manufactured in their own workshops. Haganah now took the form of a territorial home guard. Political orders outlawing counter-attacks led a right-wing splinter group, Irgun Tsvai Leumi, to form in 1931. Irgun soon had around four thousand in its ranks and was branded a terrorist organisation by British authorities because it carried out bombings and assassinations.

Haganah also expanded, and a few years later had a mobilised force of around ten thousand, who were divided into three troop divisions: the field corps (a mobile force); the protection corps (garrison units in towns and villages); and the Palmach attack force.

In 1946–47, Haganah got more weapons from abroad, especially rifles, machine guns and grenade launchers. It also reorganised the field and protection corps into six brigades and the Palmach into three elite brigades. By spring 1948, around 35,000 men were mobilised and the number was still growing.

WORLD WAR II'S FORGOTTEN BATTLES

Publishing Director: Niels Jespersen
Editor-in-chief: Hanne-Luise Danielsen
Production: Stephanie Kjær Poulsen
Translators: Nick Peers, Karen Levell, Katharine Davies, and Toni Baxter
Cover design: Sidse Lange
Cover: Scherl/Sueddeutsche Zeitung Photo/Ritzau Scanpix, GellerIBundesarchiv, Kleiner/Bundesarchiv, iStock, ullstein bild/Getty Images, Library and archives canada, Shutterstock.

Bringing History to Life is published by:
Bonnier Publications International AS,
PB 543, 1411 Kolbotn, Norway.
ISSN: 2445-6659
Printed by: Poligrafijas Grupa Mukusala, Ltd.

Marketing/Distribution UK and Export:
Marketforce (UK), 3rd Floor, 161 Marsh Wall,
Canary Wharf, London E14 9AP
Tel: +44 (0) 20 3787 9001
www.marketforce.co.uk

Licensing and Syndication:
Regina Erak – regina.erak@globalworks.co.uk
Tel: +44 (0)7753 811622

All rights reserved. Reproduction in any manner or form is strictly prohibited without the prior written consent of the publisher. Whilst every care is taken with the material submitted to this bookazine, no responsibility can be accepted for loss or damage. Whilst every effort has been made to contact all copyright holders, the sources of some pictures that may be used are varied and, in many cases, obscure.

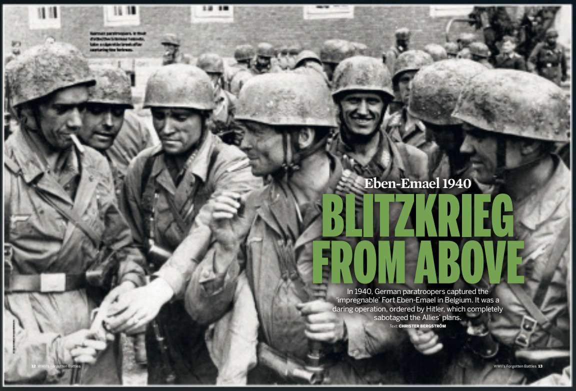
The publisher is happy to make good in future editions any error or omissions brought to their attention. The publication of any quotes or illustrations for which authorisation has not been given is unintentional.

BONNIER
Publications International

NORDIC SWAN ECOLABEL
Printed matter
3041 0876

BUNDESARCHIV, BILD183-L19034/ZEH/CC-BY-SA3.0

WORLD WAR II'S
FORGOTTEN BATTLES



Eben-Emael 1940

BLITZKRIEG FROM ABOVE

In 1940, German paratroopers captured the 'impregnable' Fort Eben-Emael in Belgium. It was a daring operation, ordered by Hitler, which completely sabotaged the Allies' plans.

Text: CHRISTER BERGSTRÖM

WWII's Forgotten Battles 13

Paratroopers captured key fort

Eben-Emael was supposed to be impregnable, but the Germans attacked with gliders and dinghies.

Operation Platinum Fox 1941

GERMANY'S FIRST DEFEAT

Operation Platinum Fox's goal, to conquer Murmansk, was part of a larger strategy to secure the mines in Petsamo. But poor planning and ill-considered decisions resulted in Germany's first operational setbacks of World War II.

Red Army's elite stood their ground

Germans underestimated the Arctic terrain and their foes as they tried to capture Murmansk.

Korsun-Cherkassy 1944

IN THE RED ARMY'S GRIP

When the Red Army attacked the Korsun-Cherkassy Pocket on 24th January 1944, it succeeded in encircling nearly 60,000 German soldiers. On 2nd February, General von Manstein decided that his ill-equipped army would try to break out – a new Stalingrad had to be avoided at all costs.

"THE 1ST AND 2ND UKRAINIAN FRONTS WOULD ATTACK FROM THE WEST AND EAST RESPECTIVELY, AND ENCIRCLE THE GERMANS"

Surrounded on the Eastern Front

Trapped in a pocket, Erich von Manstein's exhausted corps fought to avoid a new Stalingrad.

Kasserine Pass 1943

US BAPTISM OF FIRE IN DESERT

It was in North Africa that the United States entered the war against Germany. Despite initial success, the operation was dominated by serious leadership problems, which almost cost the Allies their victory in the important Battle of Kasserine Pass.

"KENNETH ANDERSON REGARDED FREDENDALL AS INCOMPETENT FROM THE OUTSET"

US fought Germany in North Africa

Erwin Rommel came close to defeating the Americans' confused effort at Kasserine Pass.

History
BONNIER
Publications International